



Monsters and Maidens

by Ravnicrasol

Chapter 001 [Rick]

Rick woke to the rumble of an engine and the cold of an air conditioning unit. His head rattled against the window as he stumbled his way into full consciousness. Light flickered outside, streaking past in an annoying incessant flicker. It took him a moment to realize he was in the last place he ever wanted to be.

On a bus.

With a deep sigh, the young teacher tried to keep his eyes shut and pretend he was still asleep, still dreaming. Perhaps that way he could shorten the passive torture that was existing in that particular location.

Fate had other plans.

"It's your turn."

Despite his best efforts, the voice prompted his mind to start paying attention to other details, mainly the laughter and shouts that were occurring elsewhere in the vehicle.

With the soft stroke on his shoulder becoming increasingly more persistent, Rick opened his eyes, a light hazel that swiftly took in the details of his surroundings. The road, the bus, the passing trees, the driver. He wondered about the merits of ignoring everything and just going back to sleep. Letting out a sigh, he glanced over at his fellow teacher, Miss Alice, and at her hand as it squeezed his shoulder once more.

"Since when do we have turns? And where's Daniel?" His eyes locked onto her own, annoyance dancing in the lowered brow.

"Since now. And he just went to sleep." She had no shits to give. Rick suspected the bags under her eyes probably had something to do with it. Alice was barely trying to hide the exhaustion.

"You should put one of the chaperones in charge, you're exceedingly popular with those, Miss Smith." He chuckled at the monicker.

"Shut it," she said bluntly, patience clearly running thin.

Rather than push his luck further, Rick acknowledged the fruitlessness of trying to avoid this duty and stood up. The abandoned seat was immediately kidnapped by Alice. Uncaring of the world or continued conversation, the young psychology teacher slumped and closed her eyes. She was probably asleep within the next ten breaths.

Rick took a moment to look at her. The woman was only a year older than him, but her soft almond shaped face and round cheeks made her easily mistakable for one of their students. If not for the tight jaw-length bob-cut and the slightly off-white gray she'd dyed her hair to, he would tease her more often about it. He made a brief mental note to talk to her about her recent foul moods once they got the chance to. No doubt it would have some drama, perhaps regarding her newest partner in life.

Shaking the thought off, Rick pulled up his backpack from underneath the seat. Sifting past the spare clothes, he found his bag of treats and a bottle of the store-brand coffee imitation. The beverage had once been comfortably cool... hours ago. Now it was a mildly annoying lukewarm. With a sigh, the young chemistry teacher locked the ziplock-bag with the rest of the chocolate treats meant for later, tossing his backpack over to the empty seat.

Rick turned towards the driver. "How much longer?"

"It should be another hour after the tunnel." The old man's head bobbed to a song only he could hear.

Another hour was definitely better than five. Still, it also meant he was going to be the only teacher keeping the peace in the bus for the next hour.

It was only now that he noticed the lingering smell of stale chips that had not been there at the start of the trip. No doubt the driver would have his work cut-out for him while waiting for their return from the hike. The students and some of the family that had come along had turned the bus into a cacophony

of shouts and laughter that only got worse the further back it went. The last row of the bus was its own chaos entirely, some of the students shoving backpacks at each other and bouncing around.

Sudden darkness engulfed the bus; they'd entered the tunnel.

"We're all going to die!" someone proclaimed with laughter. Rick's eyes had yet to adjust to the change in lighting, but he could make out the bed of flaming red hair framed against the orange lights. The teacher had little doubt who'd been the source of the comment.

Shrieks mixed with raucous cackling followed. Rick briefly wondered if he could be dropped off anywhere other than the hiking trail. It had been naïve of him to think that taking the bus with the students that were old enough to drink would mean less of a hassle, not more of one. The other buses likely were no better, though.

It took Rick a second to remember the name of the owner of the flaming hair. A student well known if, fortunately, not one he taught. "Mark Dodson, keep it down!"

"That's what she said!"

And that, clearly, only prompted them to get louder.

The consideration to try something else was tossed aside, it just wasn't worth the effort. Rick could only really curse at being there in the first place. A "custom" the college had, sending off the youngest teachers, one they'd been all too eager to shove down his throat. The older faculty staff would be enjoying the time off no doubt.

For what would be a small hike and a picnic, Rick felt he was not getting paid enough. Had they given him half a chance, he would've preferred having a nice, quiet afternoon with a complicated book. Or at least an afternoon at the laboratory. The sound of the almost-broken centrifuge would be a far more welcome irritation than *this*.

At least he could flip the centrifuge off.

Turning to take a seat, there was a flash of green light that swallowed the bus whole. Blindingly bright. The young teacher had only a fraction of a second to process that this was not normal.

It startled Rick. The light came from all around at the same time. The intensity of the light left bright spots lingering in his field of vision. The feeling of the bus lurching downwards raised every alarm in the chemistry teacher's mind, even as he hurried to get his eyes to work again. His stomach rolled, every nerve in his body screaming with panic.

The shrieks from earlier came back, louder, no longer laughing.

When Rick couldn't feel gravity anymore, he desperately reached out for the nearest thing he could grab onto. His own voice joined the chorus of screams.

For the briefest of moments, he could see outside the bus' windows.

Trees, trees so gigantic in height and width they should be impossible. A singular massive web of branches that was pierced through by the wooden spires. The bus plunged into the forest, falling, falling far more than he'd thought should have been possible. How far up were they!?

The first series of branches felt like the hammer blow of an angry God, rattling the bus and shaking it as it continued its descent. The seatbelt was the only thing keeping Rick held in place as the world spun around him. The second set of branches caused the bus to spin like a top as it continued on its way down.

There was now only a loud ringing sound as it became impossible to determine anything anymore.

When gravity returned in full, it was with a vengeful whiplash and deafening crash of breaking metal and glass.

Everything turned to pain, and then darkness.

Chapter 002 [Rick]

Rick returned to reality with a jerking motion and a short fall that ended with a heavy grunt. The world felt very, very wrong, but his brain had yet to process it in full. The man lay on his back against what should be the ceiling of the bus. The seats hung overhead like swords of Damocles arranged in rows, ready to fall on him at any second. The inside lights flickered from underneath him, casting the world above in strange shadows.

The now new floor was cluttered with tiny pieces of glass, backpacks, people, and, Rick realized with growing horror, blood. There was destruction all around him. The bus was bent and broken in places, the windows gone.

A nagging ache mixed with panic and pushed him further awake, adrenaline pumping through his veins.

His first thoughts were of moving. Everything around him looked just about ready to jump at him. Rick crawled towards the nearest person he could reach. It was a slow, woozy affair. His mind refused to stop its spinning. The more awake he was, the more his thoughts were buzzing with questions, questions, and more questions. Not quite able to recognize who it was he was checking up on, Rick tugged at the shoulder and froze when he saw the empty brown eyes staring into the infinite void, unblinking. A part of him wanted to remember the face, certain it was familiar. The rest of his mind couldn't pull out the name. A former sophomore, the young man's chest was drenched in blood, skin pale and cold to the touch. A stillness remained upon the body that took Rick a moment to comprehend, an inevitability that snapped in place with dread once the slurry of thoughts had receded.

The student wasn't breathing.

Rick's gut lurched, but he held it down, head much clearer now that his heart hammered in a thunderous race against his chest. Gagging loudly, Rick turned to get out of the vehicle as fast as he could, not wanting to stay there a second

more than he had to, but fearing his arms might give out any second. The ache from his body was barely bad enough to be an annoyance rather than an impediment. Not that it would've stopped him in his half-stumbling crawl to escape into open air.

He grunted as he made his way out through the frame of what had been the window once. The glass had fortunately been tempered and was now spread across the ground in tiny little, almost pebble-like pieces rather than sharp, jagged ones. The young teacher welcomed the dirt under his palms, a reassuring, if uncomfortable, sensation that felt real. Several dry heaves followed. He closed his eyes tightly and pushed it back down.

"Count to ten," he muttered under his breath, eyes clenched shut and ignoring the stabbing sensation of little pebbles against his clenched fists, of the bruised pain that came from all over his body.

One second at a time, he pushed the feelings down, down to where they couldn't make his hands shake or his head fog with panic. He needed to count to fifty before he could dare open his eyes again. One hundred more before he could force himself to sit with his breaths coming in slow and steady. Only once he had calmed down in full did he allow himself to chew through the situation.

"Crashed, need to call for help." The words were self-reassuring more than anything else, meant to give himself impetus, to push him towards not staying still, to set down a goal to aim for.

To spur him towards avoiding falling into the pit of panic.

A thought bubbled forth, a memory, old one, of a dull class. It'd been a grayish afternoon he'd used to go through the mandatory lessons every teacher was meant to doze their way through.

Step one, make sure his life wasn't in direct danger.

With shaking hands, he sat with his legs crossed. Carefully, Rick took the time to check himself over. There were bloody stains on his clothes and shoes, but most all of it was dry, and not even nearly at an amount that should

draw immediate concern. Still, he pushed himself to fixate on following protocol. He used slow, methodical squeezes to confirm what hurt, what didn't, and what might be out of place. Rick categorized his injuries carefully. There were several shallow cuts that had stopped bleeding already, some bruises, but no part seemed out of place, there were no broken bones, and nothing oozing. His stomach wasn't hard as a rock, so his courses in first aid told him he shouldn't be having some heavy internal hemorrhaging either.

Step two, was he in a safe location? He cursed himself. No, that should've been step one.

Still, the confirmation was fast. All around him, Rick only saw trees. But it wasn't a forest he felt any familiarity with. The trees stood thick and tall, larger than any skyscraper he'd ever seen up close. They were wooden behemoths, gigantic in their size and abnormal in their width. A city of dark mossy towers that could not have been any less than two hundred meters tall, their leafy greens hiding the sun from view as the branches connected one another in a labyrinth of wood. The world was left in a dusk that became darker the further away one looked. Rick couldn't see anything else, only the woods and the wreckage of the bus.

It was as if the universe had swallowed everything else. There was nothing but the unsettling dark forest as far as the eye could see.

Pulling his attention away from the skies and the gigantic trees, the young teacher reminded himself of the task at hand. His attention returned to the ground.

There were people spread around the area. A dozen or so laying near the bus itself. Blood seeped into the dirt. Some barely moved, others not at all. The sounds of grunts, groans, and gasps drifted through the air. Rick frowned before focusing on the vehicle itself. The discomfort in the back of his brain kicked into high gear when he realized why he couldn't look away.

Bus, vehicle, gasoline, petroleum derived and flammable. It could ignite with a spark. In gaseous form, it could even produce an explosion. Chemistry made way for common sense. Rick focused on his sense of smell. He

couldn't detect the scent of gasoline, nor could he see anything spilling from the wreckage. He sighed in relief. That would have to do for now.

At a glance, it looked like he was safe. For now, at the very least. Next step, contact emergency services and assess the condition everyone else was in. The sooner they were on their way, the fewer chances they came a moment too late.

Rick's hands dug through his pants, pulling out his phone. Its screen was cracked and the frame bent, but it turned on all the same. Still, a curse left him. Not a single bar worth of signal, no reception whatsoever. He tried dialing for the emergency services anyway, nothing but the dead tone. His phone was as disconnected from the world as he felt.

He pushed the trickle of panic down. Rick tightened his jaw. He had to keep himself focused. He'd need to find the road to manage contact with anyone and call for aid. Could he afford to? His attention shifted towards the groaning sounds. No, without a certainty of how far he'd have to go to call for help, he couldn't afford to leave, at least not until the situation was under control.

A shiver of fear ran through him as he looked at the blood. His hands curled into fists. With a deep breath, he stood up. Time to check on everyone else.

Chapter 003 [Rick]

"Is anybody able to move?" Rick's voice echoed out through the clearing and into the forest, swallowed up by the stillness that lingered heavily in the air.

The man approached the nearest person he could see. She was a young woman with long blond hair spilled around her head like a halo. Her face wasn't familiar to him, not one of his students, but there was a familiarity to the soft arch of her brows and glasses that framed her closed eyes. She was lying on her side and was very still.

A wave of hesitation coursed through Rick as he knelt next to her. There was no blood to be seen, no obvious injuries. He reached out to touch her exposed shoulder with bated breath. The coldness of her skin made his gut tighten. His fingers turned towards her wrist, pressing with his index against its underside. He waited. Nothing. Rick's lips curled. He moved his fingers to lightly press against her jugular. Another second of silence. No pulse to be found.

The young teacher's own heartbeat quickened as he looked away. He pushed the nausea down and moved on to the next one before he could dwell on it any further.

This one was a young male, groaning, clearly still alive. Rick didn't see any blood, either. That was a good sign. "Hey," he said. His hand touched the young man's shoulder to draw his attention as he knelt to take a closer look.

The man was pale and shaking slightly. Either cold or something else, perhaps shock. The messy red hair and pale skin made it clear he was one of the Dodson brothers. The glasses and nervous smile put him as not the troublesome one.

"Hey." Rick's voice rose with a little more insistence. "I'm going to check your condition. I want you to make a sound if you can hear and understand me."

There was a sharp intake of breath and a whine. The young redhead turned slightly and nodded. "Ok."

"If it hurts, tell me."

The young man's body was frail and thin. Barry Dodson, the younger brother of the more troublesome Mark Dodson. A sigh left the teacher as he moved Barry to lie on his back. The action made the student wince as the teacher began to rigorously check for injuries. A quick glance over the thin body and whip-like arms only had scratches and bruises. Rick noticed swelling in the right ankle, but nothing appeared broken or out of place.

"It hurts." The young man tightened his face as he twitched.

His eyes kept returning to the bus, to the people, to those that were crying or wailing. The young man kept shivering, his eyes becoming lost and distant. Rick couldn't leave him like that.

"Barry, I'm going to need you to take this." The teacher handed him his phone. "And I want you to keep trying to call for help, ok?"

The young redhead stirred, trying to move and letting out a pained whine. "But the others..."

"You're hurt. You might make it worse if you exert yourself. This is how you can help. We need to call for help. Do you understand how important this is?"

A small nod followed. Rick moved onto the next one.

He flinched. This one had not been as lucky. Rick recognized the uniform- it was the driver. The large pool of blood and ghostly pale complexion told the story well enough. The young teacher felt himself unable to step closer. Grimacing, Rick turned to the next one, stopping as a new shriek came from inside the bus.

The chemistry teacher pushed the sounds away and focused on reaching the next potential survivor to confirm their condition. He couldn't let himself dwell on things. Others could help with the grief and the panic. He had to

help with the wounded. He had to push forward, or let himself enter a spiral he was not sure he'd be able to escape.

Four more were confirmed dead. Rick didn't check the exact cause. A quick confirmation of a pulse had been enough. He just moved on to the next as soon as it appeared there was no beating heart. Fortunately, the dead were outnumbered by the living. The ones closest to the bus were in a better condition, alive for one. A few did not wake, but still breathed. Broken bones and bruises were frequent, some worse for wear than others.

They'd been lucky that the crash had slowed thanks to the branches from the monstrous trees. Trying to imagine how much worse things could have been otherwise was a nightmare Rick opted to put down for some other time.

"Where the fuck are we?" The voice was loud, grating, and obnoxious. But it spoke the question everyone had been quietly asking one another.

A crowd was forming near the bus, of the people who were barely wounded or still able to move. Things were becoming heated. An argument was about to break out if it hadn't already. Rick ignored the crowd and kept to his task. His mind kept bouncing back to the crash, the green flash of light. Had he seen anything out of the ordinary on the way down besides the massive trees? Had there been any signs of something else but a sea of green?

The task at hand kept him focused, and more importantly, useful. Arguing would bring nothing, crying would bring nothing. He shifted to the next victim. And the next. And the next. Slowly, he was circling around the vehicle in a circuit of ever less healthy people. Those that had been able to stand or move had mostly woken up already. With every confirmed death, his gaze turned to the woods.

There was a definite lack of a road nearby, no signs of civilization to be had. In any direction. Just trees, massive trees, and more trees.

The looming giant spires of wood surrounded them, caging them into some forgotten corner of wilderness that felt as if humanity had not been there for hundreds of years. The air was cool and quiet, oppressive. The gloom of the shadows amongst made it hard to see too far away. That certainly didn't help

the mood at all. Rick was quite certain he'd never heard of forests with trees that were twelve meters thick and ten times that or more in height. There was a creeping fog of dread that trickled down his back the more he allowed himself to think about it.

The young teacher pushed himself to ignore that as best he could, and to focus on his work, turning to the latest student he'd checked up on. The sophomore was breathing and waking up. His name was... Rick frowned, Charlie? Yes, one of his students. A rather amicable young man, he often sat near the middle of the classroom. He had dusty brown hair, was bespectacled with light silver frames, and fortunately had sustained no apparent heavy injuries other than a bump to the arm.

"Is May ok?" were the first words that came out of Charlie as soon as he'd woken up.

Rick mulled over the question. May, May... Hagan? She was Charlie's sibling... cousin, was it? He glanced at the bus and the people there, mentally going through the list of those he'd checked on. "Her arm's broken, but other than that, she's alive."

"Thank God," Charlie said, lips tightening and shaking his head. "That's reassuring either way. Where are we?"

Rick's lips thinned in turn, and his voice lowered to a whisper. "I don't know. But we need to find some way to contact help, there's no cell reception down here."

The young man nodded as he shifted slightly. His gaze shifted, sweeping around them with hawkish focus. A look of determination emerged as he took Rick's hand to stand up. "I'll look for the road."

"Do you even know what path to take?"

"That one."

Charlie pointed over Rick's shoulder and towards the forest in what, for a second, appeared to be a random set of trees, as massive and non-distinct as

any other. It wasn't until Rick noticed the trail of broken branches and glass that he realized why the young man had chosen that direction in particular. Glancing at the bus, the people there were becoming louder- some faces looked red, and people were getting physical.

For a second, Rick considered going instead. His gut tightened in response. Could he even trust himself to be alone with his thoughts?

"Should I check at least?" Charlie's question snapped him out of the sense of looming dread.

Rick let out a tight nod. "If you're able to move without issue..."

"If I find the road and call for help, will you pass my chem final?"

The words made Rick's head snap at the sophomore. It took him a second to form the mock glare. The teacher blinked for a split second before he relaxed. "No."

Charlie let out a little chuckle, feigning disappointment, checking his pockets and pulling out his phone. "Damn, at least I tried."

Had he been recording the conversation? Since when? Rick glared somewhat, unable to stop from feeling somewhat impressed. "It shouldn't be that hard for you."

"Can't blame me for trying." The young man's right arm was littered with black and blue bruises. It was fortunate they weren't more than a bother. "I'll be back in half an hour, tops. The road shouldn't be too far off. We weren't going that fast, anyway."

Rick opened his mouth to speak. Words formed in his mind, ones that lost their way attempting to reach his lips. His mind returned to the thought of the forest, the looming gloom, the silence. Hesitating, he nodded a little, pushing the feelings down, of how wrong everything felt. He'd seen the flash of green, and the surrounding forest was alien, almost hostile. Everything inside his chest told him this wasn't the right place; it told him of a certainty there was no road to be found.

That it should be him checking the woods, that there was nothing to be found but danger.

But checking was necessary, as was seeking help. The sooner the better. It was crucial. "Be careful."

"Will do."

A sinking feeling clenched around Rick's stomach the moment the young man had vanished between the trees.

Chapter 004 [Rick]

Rick looked upon the crowd near the bus and was reminded of one aspect of being a teacher that he loathed the most: angry parents. Except now it was worse. Fear and uncertainty were fueling things into a level he wasn't sure could be contained.

Not that he had a choice anyway, he'd finished checking on everyone that had been outside the bus itself. Ignoring the problem wouldn't make it go away either. Not that he wasn't tempted to test the hypothesis.

The crowd that had gathered next to the totaled upside-down bus was becoming louder by the minute. The scratched worn-out blues and greens of the bus making the silhouettes of the people next to it sharper. Curses and yells were forcing their way out of the tumultuous babble of screaming panic and growing rage. Several faces were turning red. By the time Rick was close enough to confirm what was going on in detail, he had spotted a troublesome looking head full of fiery red hair, just in time to witness as the student lunged at one of the parents.

Someone was fast enough to stop Mark before anything of concern truly happened.

A hand had reached out to grasp the red-head's shirt, jerking him back and away from the expected target. The sophomore lost his balance, getting thrown to the ground from the abrupt halt to his inertia. He scrambled to stand upright, a flurry of limbs followed by raised fists ready for a fight. Mark turned to face the potential new opponent and hesitated before his expression twisted in frustration.

This unfamiliar presence was one hard to ignore. He was a young man with shoulders that were closer to a brick-house than to flesh and bone. His biceps looked solid enough to bend steel, and his chest barreled outwards through a stiff grey shirt. He was a well-defined lump of muscle that had short black hair combed into tight symmetry, and half his face was practically

hidden away behind a pair of thick glasses. Rick tried to recall his name, but it wasn't until he remembered the moniker given by the other teachers that he realized who this was.

Tomas the Tank Engine.

The student had stepped towards Mark, frowning. "Violence is not the answer."

Mark's frustration was apparent, and he lowered his fists and scoffed. "Tell that to these shits for brains." The gesture was aimed at Mr. Daniel, the only other teacher present besides Rick and Alice.

The older male scoffed, keeping the steady glare and obviously ready to push things further.

As good a moment as any to step in, Rick broke through the crowd and into the limelight of attention. "Tomas' right, we're in no condition to start a fight. We need to handle the situation," he spoke loudly and clearly, turning his attention from Mark and towards the crowd. He eyed Daniel for a moment, the fellow teacher nodding his way, content on dropping things now that another teacher was participating. Rick continued. "Do any of you have an inkling of how many people here are heavily injured? Who's giving first aid to them?" His question shifted to face the crowd. Many present showed hesitation, looking away as Rick had forced them to turn their focus elsewhere. "We are going to coordinate while we wait for help. We can't waste time like this."

"Who gave you the authority?" Someone spoke up from the crowd. The hissing voice was nails on chalkboard, a bucket of ice that splashed down Rick's spine. It came from the person he had least wanted to interact with.

Thus, he ignored her rather than even acknowledge her existence.

The chemistry teacher explicitly turned away from the source, glancing at Daniel. "I need you to help anyone who has difficulty walking or moving on their own. You-" He turned to Mark. "-are going to help check the more critically injured people."

"Why the fuck should I help?"

"Because your brother is among them."

The words knocked the fight right out of the sophomore. Panic emerged for a fraction of a second before his jaw set and locked, his eyes narrowing and shoulders tensing. A sharp nod followed, and he left without so much as a question.

From behind Rick, the screeching voice rang louder. "Are you ignoring me!?"

Yes, he was, which was why Rick had turned to Alice and pointed at her and four others. "We need everything inside the bus taken out and accounted for, medicine especially. We don't know how long help will take to show up, knowing what we have on hand will help. I sent Charlie to check how far the road is."

A claw of a hand clutched at Rick's shoulder, "Don't you dare-"

"HELP!"

The shrill scream had cut through the air like a knife through paper. As one, everyone's gaze swiveled towards the forest, towards the source. The towering trees loomed in a silent menace, and amongst their shadows, Rick saw someone running, running so fast it was clear they feared for their life.

It was Charlie.

The young man was lacking glasses and was pale as a ghost, his face twisted in an expression of pure terror as he sprinted, trying to avoid the roots of the trees. "HELP ME PLEASE! OH GOD!" His voice came in a desperate fight against precious breath.

He'd not made it to the clearing. He was getting closer. And Rick began to move to lend aid. But his steps froze as he caught movement amongst the treetops right above the running student.

The young teacher could not believe his eyes. At first it had appeared no more than a blur of shadows, a trick of the light. But as it approached, it

became clearer it was anything but.

The vision was one straight out of a nightmare, a woman whose lower body was that of a massive black spider, both halves being as large as a draft-horse. The arachnid part was covered in a carapace colored with gleaming, deadly darkness. The young teacher felt as if every drop of blood within his body had frozen at the sight of the monster that jumped between treetops. With a speed it had no right to have at that size, the task looked no harder than jogging. Her silver eyes gleamed from underneath the bed of silky black hair as it whipped with the wind from her wild movements. The face was a ghostly visage, its rosy red lips curled into a wicked smile. Not a sound came from the creature as she approached.

And like a pinball with a target, the black creature bounced from one tree to another, getting ever closer with a ferocious speed.

"HELP!" Charlie ran, but he was no faster than the monster. Certainly not fast enough to outrun it.

The outcome was obvious. None spoke it, but none dared approach the edge of the clearing, all too aware of what was about to occur. Charlie looked over his shoulder just in time to see the monster dropping from above.

It all happened so quickly, yet every instant felt like it stretched on for eternity. Rick watched as the part-woman part-arachnid fell twenty meters and onto Charlie like a bird of prey falling on a hapless rabbit. The human crumpled and fell as the monster had caught him.

Rick's voice caught in his throat, but everyone around him found the air to scream.

The impact from the monster as she landed caused a small cloud of dust to rise, disturbing visibility for only half a second. No one moved. Every single person in the startled crowd was left breathless. Not a sound was made.

And with the settling dust, they saw that the creature had caught the sophomore, holding him in a tight grip. The young man's eyes locked with Rick's as the creature wrapped delicate, black hands around the young man's

throat, leaving him only able to choke, but not for long. The monster abruptly shook her hand while holding his neck, a wet cracking sound followed.

Like a puppet that had its strings cut off, Charlie went limp in the monster's grip. The young man's eyes had remained open and empty, his arms hanging on either side. The dusky brown hair swayed in the breeze, blank eyes looked upon Rick's, the light extinguishing from them.

And just like that, he was dead.

The silence was deafening.

It was a ringing quietness that turned all other sounds into a mute tone. A bell that had been struck and shook every spectator to their core. It clawed at their backs, reaching into their chests, and squeezing their hearts in a vice.

The spell of frozen time was broken when the arachnid monster leaned away, silver predatory eyes turning towards the crowd with a deep satisfaction and a wide smile. Her mouth had too many teeth.

Everyone present collectively felt the chill run through them, reality impacting against them at terminal velocity. "Oh God, no," someone whispered with a wheezing whimper.

The creature took a step towards them.

As one, each individual in the crowd looked in a direction they might be able to take and escape the monster. Rick knew there was no escape. The only hope would be if the creature decided to go for someone else first. Nothing else would be able to stop it.

But the creature did not move any closer. Her focus shifted from the people present and towards the forest at the opposite side of the clearing. Silver eyes narrowed in hesitation. Her body took half a step backwards.

The monster must have sensed something. Her eyes widened and, without hesitation, she turned around. The monster's hand held Charlie's corpse as if it weighed nothing, not slowing her down any as her immense body jumped

towards the trunk of the nearest tree with impossible grace. The next jump came faster still. The monster was rushing away with greater urgency than when she'd been chasing her victim.

She was entirely out of sight in mere seconds, vanishing so quickly one might have mistaken the whole thing for a bad dream.

No one dared move or make a sound for an entire minute.

"Did... something just spook that thing away?"

As if to answer the question, a thunderous roar rippled through the clearing and shook the surrounding air. And Rick felt they'd jumped out of the pan and into the fire.

Chapter 005 [Rick]

The roar hung in the air with a heaviness that turned the fear into a simmering panic just about ready to explode. It shook their bones, and the silence that hung around them made the air thick, hard to breathe. Everyone had turned to the side of the woods from which the thunderous sound had come before looking at one another with wide eyes.

Rick could see it in their eyes, the people sharing glances, peering at the darkness of the woods and back. He knew he should be more afraid, more nervous about the roar and its source. But his mind wasn't registering it. Within his mind, the single image of importance was that of the begging look on Charlie's face as the spider-monster had captured and held him aloft in her arms like a rag-doll.

The young teacher couldn't avoid it, couldn't stop himself. Like a broken record, the conversation he'd held with the sophomore played again. And again. The gut feeling of the wrongness of these woods, its looming threat, the oppressive understanding this place was not home, it was not safe.

He should have told Charlie to stay.

Instead, he'd sent his student to his death.

"We're gonna die."

It was no louder than a whisper.

It might as well have been a gunshot, it broke the loop with a shudder.

No, he couldn't let it happen again.

Pushing down the storm of brewing emotions, Rick's brain kicked in with blaring alarms, concerned with immediate survival. He knew without a doubt what awaited them if panic bloomed. The young teacher lunged forward, his voice exploding all around as loudly as he could make it. "YOU!" The word

came out with a heavy growl, his finger stopped at the nearest student he could see. In a flash, all the attention was on him. "Help Ms. Smith gather the wounded into the safety of the bus."

The command came out like a bark. It was loud, clear, and made the growing fear hesitate. It gave all of them something to focus on, and Rick would not let that go to waste. He took the chance. The commanding finger turned at three more students and at Daniel. "You, you, you, and you, help him with that." He turned to the strongest looking parents and students in the crowd, not allowing a second of silence to pass. "You lot over here, you're going to work with me to move the corpses away from here."

"But-

Rick stepped towards the one who'd spoken up. The teacher's hand gestured at the trees from where the roar had come. "Whatever it is, it's coming, and the last thing any of us wants is to-," the word caught in his throat. He grimaced and pushed on. "-to end up like... Charlie."

His words made several people nod with apprehension, but it grew in enthusiasm as they shared looks amongst themselves. Rick turned to the parents. His gaze searched for the ones that looked only partially panicked, the ones at the brink. "You." His finger aimed at the next person. "Pick whoever you can to assist you with gathering and organizing supplies, and you." Looking around, his finger moved towards the person that looked the most composed in the crowd. There was a split second of hesitation as he realized the one he'd found had been the oldest. "Can you help?"

"I know a thing or two about defenses." The old man nodded calmly. There was a quiet sense of control that surrounded him. His aged features betrayed little emotion other than determination.

"Good, pick whoever you might need," Rick said.

With the orders given, panic changed into a half-stumbling, bumbling action. Just like that, the fear turned into scared determination. It wasn't ideal, there were still people that were clearly barely hanging on to their wits. But it would have to do for now. The chemistry teacher moved and pointed at the

others to work with him, approaching one of the parents to help him move the nearest body away from the torn-up vehicle.

Both faltered in front of the lifeless blond he'd checked on earlier. "Fuck." The man he'd brought spoke under his breath. He was the sort of parent Rick would've expected to see, beer gut, slight roundness to his face, but a stern jaw.

"You knew her?"

"No, mine's... Felix, Felix Garcia. He hasn't woken up yet. I'm his father."

"I'm Rick, chemistry teacher." He could remember the name, average grades, higher engagement in class, always some joke to share afterwards.

"Smith." They shook hands, glancing back at the body of the young woman. "This is fucked up."

"Agreed." Rick had only half-nodded. He shoved down the emotions. There was no time for them right now. It was as if a part of him was submerged in a wave of surrealism, a feeling that he could just snap awake from the nightmare at any moment and find himself in his bedroom. He leaned down and grasped one of the shoulders. "Help me."

Smith was queasy, nodding, and taking a second to mirror the gesture, taking the other shoulder.

Both of them dragged the body a good fifteen meters to the side and right at the edge of the clearing.

"Should we...?" A pause, Smith looked back at the bus. "Did she come with anyone, or...?"

"I don't know." Rick shook his head, quickly letting go of the body and looking away as soon as he had the chance. There was a slight shake in his hands, enough that he had to press his palms against his thighs to calm them down.

Quietly, neither dared suggest they move further into the forest. Their eyes kept glancing between the tree-tops and the shadows. They hurried back towards the bus rather than risk staying near the trees for any longer than absolutely necessary.

"What the hell was that monster?" The man spoke in a low whisper.

"I don't know. It was up above and..." Rick's voice faltered, dying in his throat.

"Where are we?"

"I don't know," he replied, lowering his head.

They glanced at the others that were helping move the bodies. One of the younger students dropped theirs in their rush to vomit near a tree. Others only stood next to the bodies and looked down at them in horror. Some were struggling and begging the bodies not to be moved. Those were pulled into the bus. Rick could hear the sobs that came from inside, they lingered in the air like a heavy fog.

Things were settling in, and as much work as there was being done, not everyone could help. The teacher pushed himself to ignore the sounds, the cries, the smells. With help from Smith, they did their best to help and move everyone who'd passed on away from the bus.

The line-up of bodies was a sight that made Rick's stomach roil. By the time they'd finished, it was over a dozen in size. They had covered their faces with spare shirts and other pieces of cloth, it was the only way to mitigate their presence.

Smith had left to be next to his son as soon as they'd finished the task. Rick just took the break to catch his breath, standing next to the totaled bus, his back towards the vehicle while his eyes kept glancing at the trees, at the forest, at the place the roar had come from. Emotions kept trying to well up within him, simmering as they pushed up to the surface, and the chemistry teacher kept shoving them down. There was a storm inside of him threatening to escape he couldn't let himself succumb to.

The thoughts were interrupted when he saw Alice approaching him. Her grey hair and green eyes looked frazzled and worn, her body was a bundle of nerves, tense and coiled. She was rattled, showing a half-hidden look of concern. Her expression was tightened into forced neutrality, but her hands were shaking enough she had to clutch them tightly. To anyone who knew her, it was an easy read. She was as much near the edge of panic as everyone else, even if she was trying to hide it.

"We should cover them completely," she said with soft words, her tone hushed, and giving a nervous glance over her shoulder to confirm whether the others had heard her. "It's the least we can do."

Rick's focus turned towards the bodies. The image of Charlie's death made him grimace. The monster had taken the corpse with her even when running from the roar. The teacher didn't want to think about it, but he knew, they couldn't make themselves the easier target. Part of the reason he'd proposed to move them there had been to draw attention away from the bus. But he was also aware he couldn't use that argument with Alice, she'd be sure to refute him and hard. Logic dictated he threw in a change of subject. "I'm more anxious about telling May that had been Charlie." The words were enough to make the psychology teacher shudder. But it was clear that wasn't enough, Rick sighed. "But I'm worried whether we'll survive. We can't stay here."

"Are you...!?" Alice's words cut short the instant she spoke them, recognizing she'd raised her voice. A quick check over her shoulder. She lowered her volume to a whisper. "Are you crazy!?"

A small sigh of relief made its way through Rick's mind. This was the better option to talk about. Direct, to the point, less to hesitate about. "Got better ideas? Food and water aren't infinite, cell reception is shot."

She wavered, almost curling into herself as she bit her thumb. "We... just fell. We only need to bunker down, use the bus as cover. Help will come."

"How? From where?"

The simple question knocked the words out of her lips. She hesitated, lowering her gaze. "We need to talk with the other parents and teachers, hash

out what we'll do." She'd changed the subject, redirected the goal.

Rick's brow furrowed, remaining quiet, not trusting that things were as easy as she was making them out to be. Nor that they could fully trust on a quorum to be able to decide what to do. If they didn't want to die, they'd have to take things into their own hands.

And soon.

Chapter 006 [Rick]

It took only a handful of hours before things had slowed down into a restless silence. The bodies had been laid out away from the bus, and those who'd survived but were worse for wear had been placed inside the relative security of the totaled vehicle.

That left the bulk of everyone's effort going towards dismantling the seats and cushions from the upside-down bus. The pieces of furniture would be moved to obstruct the shattered windows and block easy access from the outside. It was a semblance of safety that, as far as Rick was concerned, would collapse the moment they were tested by anything of proportionate size to the spider monster.

But at least the sense of security would cut down on the panic. They had a deeper need for that. The looks on everyone's faces spoke of a bare thread keeping them hanging. So keeping everyone away from that dangerous ledge was the most important thing right now.

Of those that remained among the living, there'd been a dozen or so that'd been left partially incapacitated in some shape or form. Be it broken bones or deep gashes. Of the rest, most were only bruised and scratched. But their main concern was the handful of critically injured and those whose conditions looked to be stable but unlikely to be that way for long. Alice had found a first-aid kit to sterilize the wounds and put gauze on them as best she could, but it was a far cry from the treatment they needed to survive.

Seeing no better way around it, Rick stepped into the bus, raising his voice so everyone would hear. "We have to leave." The words came with a bang of determination. And as soon as the teacher spoke them, he noticed several looks of anger being shot his way from within the bus, especially from Alice. The female teacher had been kneeling next to one of the critically injured and was clearly not expecting him bring this up now.

Rick pressed on. "We have enough supplies to last us a few days, we cannot stay here."

"I agree." The statement came from the oldest member in the survivor's group, the one who'd helped with organizing some of the people to dismantle the bus interior for parts. The fellow's face was an example of chiseled sternness, old and worn, his eyes held steel within. "We are unarmed in hostile territory. We need to get aid. Or at the bare minimum reallocate somewhere more defensible."

Rick took a moment to remind himself of the man's name... Mister Gabriel, was it? He was sure the man was someone's grandfather, but right now no names came to mind. Not that he was focused that too much, the conversation was more important right now.

Alice shot them an angry glare. "Look, we don't need to move from here," she hurried to speak up. "This is a defensible spot, the seats are sturdy enough. We can split up, have people seek and gather supplies. There are wounded here who're not able to move, not without their condition worsening."

An uneasy silence spread through the crowd. There were some who nodded at that proclamation. Others kept hardened expressions.

"They can't be saved." Everyone's gaze turned to the loud redhead standing near the entrance, Mark Dodson. "Anyone who thinks we're not fucked is a moron, we need to move the fuck away from this place." Next to him, his younger brother shrunk and stepped away from the brash young man, trying to avoid the attention. "I'd say right now would be the best time."

"The spider retreated from the roar," Mr. Gabriel said with a scoff. "Whatever made that sound, meeting it in the dark is just begging to becoming a quick meal."

"Agreed there. We need to be careful on how we do this. The bodies being away from the bus should help in that," Rick spoke quickly. At his words, every head inside the bus towards him with looks that were far less sympathetic than they'd been a second ago. The chemistry teacher frowned at

everyone else present, trying to push the pressure off of him. "Anyone here armed? Conceal carry?"

Their collective gazes lowered. A long silence followed with uneasy glances.

Rick nodded, lips tight in concern. "Then we can't protect ourselves."

"The gasoline in the tank is still usable," Mr. Gabriel scoffed. "But we're still short in supplies and that spider could come back."

"Doesn't mean that leaving is our best move," Alice muttered. Her eyes moved towards the rear of the bus, where the mantles rested, where there were people laying down and groaning. Some were in obvious pain, others deathly still. The woman's frown deepened, but her tone remained soft. "We can't let the wounded just... die."

Rick's lips thinned, the touch of tension within him being pushed back. Was there a better option available? "No one needs to die if we can avoid it." His brow furrowed. "And we have no idea whether help will come at all. We have to move considering the worst and push to get everyone to safety as soon as we can."

"I don't believe the chances of being found are slim." The voice came from the back. All eyes turned over to the muscular young man with thick glasses. Tomas squirmed as he took half a step forward, just enough to project his voice a bit better. "Our crash here must have been loud, it drew attention from that Arachnae. It's likely to draw attention from elsewhere too."

"The what now?" Mr. Gabriel frowned.

"Arachnae, fantasy creature, top half is a human, bottom half is a spider."

"I don't think the exact terminology is of importance right now, unless we see wizards and dragons," Rick commented, turning back towards the other survivors, and spreading his arms wide to make it clear he was addressing all of them. "We can't be sure we're anywhere near a place that could have

spotted, heard, or detected what happened. Setting out to find help is our only option."

"Agreed," Mr. Gabriel nodded solemnly. "If there's any kind of population center nearby, then they should have a better understanding of the terrain and the threats. We need that help."

Rick glanced at the crowd. He made sure to focus on each face for half a second. It was clear to him there would not be a unanimous resolution. But he didn't need one either. "We have to prepare at least a scout team or two to head out and look for help. First light tomorrow would be the best option. Anyone interested in volunteering?"

"I will go."

Mr. Gabriel's hand rose as he stood straight; his body shook slightly as he looked at Rick, resolute, his expression hard as the shadows within the bus hid the graying hair. Next to him stood a young woman with dirty gold hair, her face contorted into a glare. She hissed something into his ear that he ignored, the older man remaining firm.

The young woman stared daggers at Mr. Gabriel and then at Rick.

"Well, that makes two of us." The teacher nodded. "Everyone else that wants to join, think it over and give me a heads up before tomorrow. For now we should focus on preparing for the night."

No one else spoke up. The young chemistry teacher nodded and stepped outside. He needed some air.

Chapter 007 [Rick]

Outside the bus, Rick couldn't help but sense the atmosphere was no less oppressive outside than within the relative safety inside. The trees loomed over them in all directions, the air had an almost unnatural stillness to it, everything felt as if it were out of proportion. Were he in a more humorous mood, he might have even joked about having been shrunk down. The idea felt no less strange than everything else that had happened thus far at least.

Still, he preferred it than being with the others. It gave him a chance to calm down and avoid getting cornered into answering uncomfortable questions. The part that scared him the most was thinking about what it meant to "set out". It wasn't as if they had any sense of direction let alone experience in this kind of scenario.

For now, he was leading, pushing everyone from the pit of panic as best he could. That didn't mean he had any definite answer to things. It'd be better if someone else had the answers. But pretending to have a clue was better than doing nothing at all.

Several deep breaths. He pushed himself to calm down, shove the emotions down again. Dimly, he turned to pay closer attention to the others that were outside along with him. There were some adults and a handful of students mulling about. All remaining just near enough to the totaled transport that they could rush in if anything happened.

Rick's eyes locked on the ones who'd been smoking. The sight of it made his fingers twitch towards his empty pocket out of an old half-forgotten habit. Rather than let the feeling sink in, he reached into his backpack and pulled out some of the candy. The chocolate was the only relief he could find there. Unfortunately it was partially melted, the simple enjoyment diminished somewhat with the mess it left on his fingers and cheek.

The young teacher turned his gaze back to the forest.

Mid-day had passed hours ago, night was falling, and the darkness between the hulking trees was spreading like a stain of black oil. It covered the floor and branches, enveloping the very air around the bus and those standing near it into a dark gloom. Only the tree tops had any direct sunlight shining on them, bright peaks of green and orange that turned into streaks of brown and inky shadows as one followed the trunk downwards to the thick roots at ground level.

It was as if a weight was falling onto Rick's shoulders. The darker the forest became, the less he could see, and the closer a threat could come without them even seeing it approaching. The blackness only invited the imagination to run wild, what else might it hide? What threats lay within?

The minutes slipped by, and people moved in and out of the bus, mulling but never far. Rick was the only one who wouldn't go back inside. Looking into the silence that surrounded them was occupying most of his thoughts, a reprieve. Every passing minute made the wooden behemoths appear as if fangs from a gigantic beast, the darkness into an ever expansive maw ready to swallow them whole in one bite.

The moon didn't take too long to appear in the night sky. Its beams of light streaked through the forests to the ground, creating pools of ghostly white clarity within the darkness. The white orb hung full in the sky. Something about its presence felt oddly reassuring. There was something about it that felt familiar in what was an otherwise alien place.

A gasp caught Rick's attention. He turned to one student who'd been standing furthest away from the bus. The sophomore had taken several steps back in quick succession right after, covering his mouth and pointing at something up above as he ran inside the bus and stood just shy of the door, staring.

The action drew everyone's attention. Perhaps it was morbid fascination, but they moved closer in an attempt to get a better look, staring at what the young man had pointed at.

Rick saw it up above, a shadow. Alarms went off inside his mind. "To the bus," he muttered, and all agreed on the spot to hurry back. His gaze adjusted on the foreign presence, it moved silently through the night. He inched closer

to the bus entrance, but did not step inside, observing intently. The shadow was slowly moving downwards. He could not look away from the shadow as it descended, drawing circles between the trees in a haunting dance that came to a conclusion as it angled itself towards the corpses.

The monster passed through a beam of light, and for the second time that day, Rick could not believe his eyes.

It was a woman- no, a bat? It was a bizarre mix of both. Rather than arms she had large leathery wings, and ears larger than her head, pointy and sharp. Moonlight kissed her pale skin, and darkness caressed her short black hair. The creature was as devoid of cover or clothes as the spider, but unlike the Arachnae, there was something almost delicate to her features. She landed with not even a sound, looking around, staring at the bus for several long seconds before turning and focusing on the bodies. The creature moved in a rush to reach her target.

Everyone became still, holding their breath. Would it come for them next? Would it leave?

Making a shushing motion towards the occupants of the bus, Rick glanced around, checking the sky and the forest to confirm there were no other monsters nearby. He spotted nothing, everything appearing as still and quiet as it had been before, so his focus returned to the flying monster.

They all waited with nervous silence. The creature moved towards its target and grabbed a body by the wrist. Rick thanked the darkness. It allowed him to not distinguish which one had been picked.

"Oh, God," someone muttered from within the bus in a whisper.

The minutes trickled by into an eternity. Everyone remained still, watching as the monster moved around the bodies, stopping to glance around, grasping at another with its feet. Its wings spread wide, clearly intent on leaving with its victim of choice.

A growl escaped from within the forest.

The hairs on Rick's neck stood on end as the bat-like monster instantly dropped the body and leapt up to take to the sky, clearly intent on escaping some horrible fate before the source of the sound could appear. The panic was apparent in how hard she was flapping with little to no hesitation and everything she had to offer.

It was too late, there had never been a chance of escape.

A blur shot out of the shadows. It emerged like a dark heat seeking rocket, that crossed the air in a beautifully precise arch. The bat spotted the threat but could not move out of the way in time. The blur intercepted the bat in midair. A cry escaped the bat-like creature as she was knocked from the sky, tumbling down and crashing onto the ground. They'd fallen right into a ray of light at the edge of the clearing, both entities tangled in what was clearly a struggle for survival. Shrieks pierced the silence; the two bodies rolled. There was a flash of green energy that appeared to surround them for a fraction of a second.

Then, the attacker raised a white claw, gleaming in the night, bringing it down with brutality.

The bat shrieked, a gurgled cry, struggling harder. The now bloodied claw rose and came back down. This time it was accompanied by a thud and a crunch.

Everything became still.

Slowly, the monster that had attacked the bat clawed at it a third time to make sure its prey was dead. Then, it slowly stood up in a slow stretch. White fur stained in blood glimmered under the moonlight.

It was only then that Rick got an unrestricted view of the new creature as she turned towards them in full.

She was a dark skinned woman with Amazonian proportions. Her hair was a pale ashen white, if not for the mud that matted it into a clump. And though for a fraction of a second she looked no more than human, it quickly became clear she was not. Rather than hands or feet, she had enormous claws. The

fur covering them reached all the way to her elbows, and it would've been snowy had they not been bloodied with the most recent kill. A pair of triangular ears on top of her head rotated this way and that before turning straight to the bus.

Tall, strong, and powerful. Her body screamed savage force and death.

She stepped through the ray of moonlight, the curves of her body contrasted by the blood drenching her chin and claws. Her shoulders straightened, her expression focused, and she frowned with dark green eyes that pierced through the darkness. Her entire physique shook with contained violence.

With her focus upon the bus, she leaned back and inhaled sharply. Then, she let out a roar.

The sound hit Rick like a hammer, a physical impact against his chest with an invisible force that rattled him down to the bone and nearly knocked him over. If not because his hands were holding onto the bus' frame for support, he would have surely fallen down.

It was the voice of a rolling mountain, an unstoppable force of nature. Anything in her path would be destroyed and swallowed up.

Rick knew, he knew with little doubt, nothing would protect them from her if she so chose to unleash that violence against them.

Chapter 008 [Rick]

Rick could only stare as the streak of moonlight gleamed upon the imposing woman that was, for all intents and purposes, the one able to decide the fate of everyone present. Through the dimness of the forest, her image stood equal parts alluring and dangerous. Scars littered her honeyed skin, blood dripped from her soft snowy fur. Her figure was that of a creature that looked human in most ways, beautiful even, tall and muscular yet accentuated by naked curves that left little to the imagination. And at the same time, she was no more human than the other monsters, the claws she had for arms and feet making it apparent enough.

She was wild, powerful, deadly.

Yet it was her eyes that Rick found most captivating. Green and blue, they held a light of their own that pierced the darkness. An infinity of swirling depths was kept within them. They snared his attention with sharp claws and refused to let it go. The man felt as if he was a mouse in front of a tiger and unable to turn to look other way. There were no less than twenty meters between the two, but the chemistry teacher could sense it would take her but a second to reach and end him.

Were she to wish it.

That very same gaze angled away, changing the focus towards the corpses that lay next to her downed prey. One second, two. She glanced back at the bus, and then she swung her attention to the foe whose blood still dripped from her claws. She took a single step out of the beam of moonlight; her figure reduced to a blurred silhouette in the shadows. Rick could only see vague shapes and could only guess what the terrible incredible creature was doing now that the darkness turned her near invisible to his eyes. He had absolute confidence it mattered little. For once, her attention returned to the living. It was then that their fates would be sealed.

Rick was reminded of a documentary he'd once seen, of people during the great wars, sitting in bunkers, knowing that the chaos and destruction would unfold around them within mere moments. To him it held a certain similitude, a certain morbid appeal. The main difference was that the incoming violence was neither bullets nor explosions, but a single creature that was far too alluring for the apparent power she wielded.

The chemistry teacher remained the lone person still outside the bus, waiting, leaning into the chassis and burning with curiosity. To know what? He couldn't explain it, yet it was just as impossible to escape the pull. A part of him wondered idly if, perhaps, what he wanted was to stare death in the eye before it all came to an end. Or maybe it was something else.

The shudders and whimpers from the former passengers broke the silence of the night. Some prayed under their breath, their voice carrying through the inky air that enveloped them. Someone even dared to turn on the flashlight of their phone, only for the flicker of light to die out instantly, others having rushed to cover the source before it could risk bringing attention upon them.

And all the while, Rick remained on the spot, peering into the shadow that moved through the bodies. His heart beat like a wild drum, and his eyes strained yet unable to make anything out specifically. The minutes ticked by; the air becoming thick.

No one moved. They all wished she would leave. The prayer fell on deaf ears.

Rick sensed movement. He saw the gleam of those two blue-green eyes that flickered like a roiling sea. Her focus had fallen upon him now, in full. His every muscle froze solid, those that stood near him and near the entrance pushing themselves further in. Someone let out a whimper.

And the feline approached slowly, cautiously.

The shadows hid the details, but Rick could make out the contours of her body. There was confidence in the saunter, in the sway of hips, and yet there was impossible patience in her slowness, in the way her eyes flickered at the bus and back at him, taking every minute detail. Each step was quiet, even

sound was afraid to stand in her presence. And the closer she was, the clearer he could see the swirls of emotion within those eyes. What were they? He couldn't tell.

Rick's heart hammered against his rib cage in an attempt to escape as the closer she was. It swiftly became clear she was taller than she seemed at a distance. She was stalking, so she'd been slightly leaning forward, but as she approached, her stance relaxed, her shoulders straightening as her tail flicked at the side of her hips. Whatever caution she'd held slowly vanished. She was domineering in her quiet proclamation there was nothing here that would be able to threaten her.

The woman came to a stop in front of Rick.

Peering down at the teacher, she stood taller than him by a full head. He was tall, a meter eighty five or so, yet she held her chin at the height of his forehead. It was an imposing presence that lingered close to him; her gaze pinning him to the ground as he stood and barely leaving room for him to breathe.

Then she moved to step past Rick, towards the bus entrance.

Someone whimpered inside, and within Rick's mind, the image of Charlie flashed bright and sharp. The scream, the eyes, the guilt. The teacher's body moved before he could think to stop himself. The man stepped to the side, arms wide, blocking the bus entrance and preventing her access to the inside of the as he looked upwards at the feline and met her gaze firmly.

"No," He spoke the single word, somehow having found the strength to draw breath.

"Look down," a voice hissed from within. "She'll take it as a challenge!"

Immediately Rick's head bowed, eyes aimed firmly at her clawed feet, but his body did not twitch from where he held himself. Nor did it dare to move further. Like a statue, he remained locked in place, his heart now drumming fast enough it was a deafening hum between his ears. Icy sweat ran down his back, and it became colder with every passing second.

The presence of the feline woman was a force in and of itself. The very air around her was oppressive. She remained still for only a moment. He could not read her expression, though every part of him desperately wished he could at least see death as it came for him. When she moved, Rick held his breath. She leaned closer. Her breath was hot and rancid with the stench of blood. It washed against Rick's face like a damp cloth, making him shiver.

With apparent interest, she sniffed at him. The first sound she'd made since her approach. The human's eyes wavered as he fought with his own body to stop himself from trembling. This close, he could make out in minute detail how the anatomy of her hands made it seem as if she was wearing large furry gauntlets with wicked obsidian claws at the tips. But they were no gauntlets. They were her paws. The bony white fur ran all the way up to her elbows before it turned into tanned skin. Everything about her looked human, all save those claws on her hands and feet. And with some small sense of suppressed amusement, he realized her tail too was amongst the features that were not human.

After a heartbeat of silence as she kept sniffing him, he dared slowly look up into her eyes once more, into those deep pools of glimmering azure. He felt his heart stop, and his mouth fell slightly open. Despite the dried blood covering her lower jaw, despite the unkept wild hair, and despite the imposing threat of her very proximity, Rick could not help himself but gasp.

The backhand that hit him a moment after felt like getting run over by a truck.

One instant he was standing at the bus' entrance, and the next he was sprawled on the ground four meters away, seeing the world spin. Shrieks exploded from within the vehicle as the feline leaned inside to look at the source of the noise. Her tail lashed once, twice, thrice. She let out a loud snort, stepping back, and turned to Rick as he frantically struggled to stand up, his mind reeling from the impact and attempting to assess the situation again.

She pounced before he could- a leap across the air, a graceful arch that covered the four meters in a single easy bound. Rick had rolled out of the way, but it didn't matter. With a quick step, she'd caught up, her hand pinning him to the ground and driving the air right out of his chest.

A feral smirk played on her face as she leaned down, meeting his eyes with evident amusement at his feeble attempt to slip away. One clawed hand kept his chest in place, her strength impossible to fight against. The other hand moved to grasp his skull and hold him still.

He could no more escape her grip than he would be able to spontaneously start flying. She was supernaturally strong. There was no other explanation. The woman was so strong, the young teacher was quite sure she could rip his head clean off if she so wished.

Breath ragged and heart racing in an attempt to flee his ribs, he stopped moving, meeting her gaze in full.

She leaned down, breath hot and heavy against his face. She sniffed deeply first, several quick times later. A growl came to her lips as Rick twitched. The human instantly became still again, breathing hard as she leaned closer.

And then she licked his cheek.

Chapter 009 [Rick]

With the monster's tongue lapping against his cheek, Rick's mind whirled, the gears spinning out of control, eyes wild and rapidly blinking as she leaned closer. Her tongue was wet, rough, and stinking of things far worse than bad breath. There was a hint of blood in that scent, but the human was far too near a panic attack to properly think things through. What was going on?

She licked him a third time, tracing her way to his lip. After a moment, she leaned away, appearing amused at something, letting go of him as she sniffed at his shoulder, inhaling deeply. Another sniff. She followed her way down his right arm. The sniffing paused at his fingers.

The woman stopped as she focused on the blue backpack he'd been holding in a death-grip this whole time. A purr escaped her, sniffing harder and licking her lips. She reached down and snatched the bag right out of his hands. She frowned at it, as if it was her first time having seen such an object. She turned it upside down as her other hand let go of him. The contents fell out and spilled all over the ground. It was one item in particular that caught her attention in full. The zip-bag of half melted chocolate treats.

The sugary treat had oozed out, perhaps when Rick had fallen onto it from her shove. The feline glanced at it, frowning, sniffing closer before giving it a tentative lick. The reaction was immediate. Her tail lashed out, eyes widening, the feline ears atop her head perking up. She began licking some more. The wild woman chomped on the side of the bag that had the most chocolate covering the outside plastic, biting down and ripping it out in a single savage yank of her head.

Laying on the ground and looking up at her in disbelief, Rick could only blink in disbelief as he watched her purr as she chewed at the stolen treat. The sound lasted up until she started gagging. The white-haired woman spat out the pieces of plastic, glaring at the packet while holding it pinched between two fingers as if it had just committed a grave sin against her.

The young teacher hesitated, his mind racing. From the chaos of near panic, a thought made its way through. "Hey." He leaned over, sitting up just a bit, waiting for her to turn his way before he began slowly reaching for the bag, but not daring to even make it seem like he was going to take it out of her paws.

She pulled her hand away from his reach as she glanced at the bag of sweets with a scowl. Her eyes narrowed in a silent threat when she turned back to look at him. He didn't move, meeting her gaze and lowering his eyes afterwards, but remaining firmly in place. He lingered, swallowing hard, waiting, wondering. Was this the right choice? Should he do this? Was she going to attack him and put a definite end to this?

A heartbeat, then a dozen more that followed in quick succession. He waited with bated breath.

She frowned, peered at the bag, then at him, and then at his outstretched hand. Pausing, she kept her eyes narrowed. Her lips pulled back, and she bared her fangs at him as she moved her clawed hand closer to his palm. Rick gulped, nodding slowly when she dropped the bag in his palm.

The snarl was making his body want to shudder uncontrollably. It was physically oppressive. With supreme effort and no small amount of nervousness, he picked up the bag and peeled off the plastic from the chocolate. Carefully, gently, with shaking fingers and with an aching chest that was nearly going to fail at containing his racing heart, he took out one of the half-melted pieces of candy, now devoid of plastic, and put it in her outstretched paw.

She looked at it closely. Gave a brief look at Rick, then at the chunk of chocolate. The monster lady sniffed at it and then licked it off of her paw, taking the entire piece into her mouth and chomping down on it. At first she did so slowly, appearing to test whether there was plastic within, but once she had confirmed there was none to be had, she chewed on it loudly and swallowed.

A wide smile spread across her face, smirking as she sat down in front of Rick, legs crossed, leaning forward. She licked her paw as she looked at the

bag with keen eyes. Her head made a gesture at it. The human let out a nervous chuckle, feeling a knot forming at the back of his neck. "Oh, you want more?" He couldn't help but force a chuckle while his shoulder remained stiff enough to hurt. Rick mentally calculated how much remained. Maybe enough for a dozen or two similarly sized pieces? Less?

What would happen once the chocolate was gone? His back felt like it was about to collapse in on itself from the tension.

Keeping the smile fixed in place, he took another sample, scooping it out of the bag and offering it. It took a moment; she leaned down to inspect it, sniffing it again, licking the edge lightly. Her paw reached out to grab his wrist firmly. Sudden panic rose in Rick's chest as she opened her mouth, sharp fangs laying within. The man fought with his own body to keep it extremely still, watching as she slowly licked at his fingers now that he was unable to pull the limb away, lapping his palm clean while purring, grinning from ear to ear while her tail lashed.

The woman let go after a second and leaned away. Rick let out a withering sigh and relaxed, glad he still had all ten digits. Her face glowed with a smile as she opened her mouth, clearly asking for more. With a nervous chuckle, he obliged, doing his best to ration the sweets so they would last as long as he could make them. His brain was going a mile a minute as it attempted to figure out what to do, where to lead things. He couldn't just keep giving her chocolate indefinitely; he'd run out, and fast.

What would he do afterwards? "Here you go." Another piece of candy. Rick's hands were shaking ever so slightly, but he was getting it under control. His eyes moved up to her perked, feline ears as she suckled his finger. And the absurdity of the thought that followed made him want to scream at himself to stop. Should he? He waited, allowing her three more nibbles before he'd worked up the courage.

Not that any better options came to mind.

It was all or nothing.

The chemistry teacher used his free hand to reach out towards her head. Very, very slowly. The hammering of his heart between his ears was deafeningly loud. She saw the outstretched hand and frowned. Rick froze, leaving it there, unmoving, waiting.

His other hand offered more chocolate underneath the outstretched hand.

Her focus shifted towards the candy and leaned to pluck it from his fingers with her lips. In doing so, she pressed the top of her head against his other hand. Waiting before moving again, Rick gently dug his fingers into her scalp, stroking in slow circles, and following through her hair up to the base of those twitching ears. He was ready to pull out at the first sign of so much as a twitch of a brow. But she stayed there, and he proceeded. One scratch, two, then three. He drew slow lines with them, unable to look away from her intense gaze as she peered up at him.

A nervous chuckle left him as he redoubled on the insanity, caressing her hair and ears, trying his best to make sure it was enjoyable. His mind kept bouncing back to Odin, the odious black cat that loved nothing more than to scratch him to hell and back.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a purr. Rick let out a massive sigh of relief. His whole body half-slumped back to the ground as he continued scratching. A strange hysteria gripped at his chest, making him want to laugh. A part of him wondered just how mentally exhausted his brain was to have thought this idea was a decent one. But the sight of the feline woman relaxing into his touch was as good a sign as any.

Her purring became louder, leaning forward, catching Rick by surprise as she buried her face against his stomach, her arms wrapping around his waist, tail lashing back and forth in an apparent simple enjoyment. She forced him onto his back as she cuddled close against him. The gesture prompted him to continue, now moving both palms to the top of her head, stroking and massaging the base of her ears.

The teacher marveled at them, feline in their entirety, attached to her head and completely functional, the muscles twitching on her scalp. Nothing about

them looked any different than a cat's. He didn't spot human ears at the sides of her head, either. It seemed as if this was the real deal.

A growl came out of her when he'd slowed down to observe her ears more closely, her grip tightening dangerously. Rick's hands immediately moved faster, the question repeating itself inside his mind over and over and over.

The memory of what she'd done to the bat-like monster, and of how she scared off the spider with but a roar... Rick's heart raced as he considered the prospect. What if...

Hope wormed its way into his chest.

What if he could convince her to keep them alive?

Chapter 010 [Rick]

Sunlight streaked through the treetops all the way to the ground, the rays incandescent and painful, yet not quite as irritating much as the edges of Rick's mind felt at the moment. His consciousness came to him with aches that lingered and pierced into his thoughts from all angles. Everything seemed out of place and disjointed. Nothing made sense. His brain scrambled to piece together what was happening as his aching body greeted him.

Opening his eyes, the first thing the man saw was the ash-haired feline woman. Just like that, the slumber in his thoughts vanished. For a fleeting moment, he had hoped that what had happened last night had been no more than a dream. But she was no dream. Naked, she lay half on top of the young teacher, keeping him pinned to the ground under her weight while squeezing him against herself. Her soft, supple self.

Rick thought, for a second, of how tender she was, how calm she looked, and how peaceful it all felt. And yet, it took but a moment to note the bloodstains on her claws, face and neck, and of how her body thrummed with strength even as she slept. Her grip on his body felt entirely impossible to move, yet she was relaxed. A light snore mingled with a purr that was far too tranquil for the violence she'd unleashed the previous night.

After the sights came the smell, and it slapped him on the face with a damp cloth that carried a stench of blood and sweat. It was primal, intense, saturating his throat. Rick was clearly not in a situation where he could do anything about it, either. Especially since her grip on him tightened whenever he twitched or tried to wriggle away.

There was a startled sound nearby, but he was unable to see where it originated from due to the current angle. Rick knew he must have passed out last night at some point. How? He wasn't sure. It must have been a hard crash from the adrenaline of the day. What of the others? He had to check.

Turning to the feline woman, he kept his grumble silent. If she was keeping him bound, might as well see if he could wake her up. Wriggling, Rick reached up to the woman's head and slowly felt his way around until he found those two triangular, furry ears he'd been stroking the night prior. It took only a moment of scratching, but the reaction softened. She relaxed, purring. Her arms tensed and hugged him closer for a moment before she sighed and slowly released him.

It took some wriggling, but when he'd managed to escape her immediate grasp, she stirred, opening her blue-green orbs and staring at him. The pout that followed was disarmingly cute, if not for the dried blood staining her jaw and claws.

"Purrrr," she muttered in apparent indignation. Rick hesitated, but only for long enough, at least until it was clear she wasn't about to do anything about his escape. His eyes darted towards the source of noise that had caught his attention moments earlier.

His breath caught in his throat as he saw trails of blood that had not been there last night, ones that lead into the vehicle. What had happened? Dread rushed through him. His gaze turned to the bus. Several people were peeking out with pale faces, showing rings under their eyes. Each of them was no better for wear than he was. Their gazes angled to the feline woman for a moment, and then at Rick.

Said feline was, instead, bending down and licking the blood out of the fur on her hands, appearing entirely unperturbed and uncaring about the others. She was being slow and methodical, clearly intent on having a tongue bath.

Rick turned towards the others. Of the storm of emotions welling through him, there was a growing sense of numbness to it all. What should he even feel about this situation? No, now was not something he should even be asking himself. He didn't even know what had transpired. That was more important.

"What happened?" He asked the young... Tomas? Tomas, right, the student with a well-built body and glasses thick like a bottle's bottom.

The sophomore's face glanced at the professor and shook his head. "After you fell asleep, she approached the bus, stepped inside. Some people screamed, they tried to defend themselves, attacked her, and..."

His head gestured at the pile of bodies. There were two new ones in the lineup.

Rick's stomach lurched, but he kept it down, responding with a grimace.

"We were nothing to her, one casual swipe from her was enough." Anger and fear flared across the young man's face, his expression becoming grim. There was an attempt to glare at the feline, but he did not dare to, certainly not wanting to risk starting anything.

The young teacher could only nod. He took a long pause to calm his emotions and head back to where he'd been sleeping and sought his backpack. He noticed the feline's eyes were on him as he moved, though she appeared uninterested for the time being, continuing on her self-cleaning while Rick put the pouch with chocolates into the bag and pulled out a bottle of water. He needed a long gulp or four to clean his throat of the smell and took the chance to think things through more carefully.

He needed a plan.

What now? What would they do? How could they proceed? The monster woman was right there, uncaring and unmoving. She'd kill them all if she wanted to. She was the most important piece of the puzzle. Her presence could mean their end... but could it also be their salvation?

Determination swept through him. He moved towards the vehicle, stepping inside. Waiting a second to let his eyes adjust to the dimness, he focused on those gathered there. Most everyone was present. The mood was grim, their looks distraught and distant. Rick nodded once and clapped his hands, drawing the other's attention.

"We won't last. We need to locate help. I am volunteering to head out right here, right now. And if I'm lucky, I hope to get the lady out there to follow me." A heartbeat of silence. Every pair of eyes on the bus was looking at him

as if he'd grown a new head. It didn't stop him, he continued. "If anyone else has a better idea, or wants to join, this is your chance."

"You're going to get yourself killed," Alice spoke up first, scowling deeply. The bags under her eyes were heavy.

"Do we have another option?" The response came from Mr. Gabriel, the old man slowly standing up. "It's gutsy, but she's the spookiest thing out here. Count me in."

The woman next to him gawked. "Grandpa!" She proclaimed, hissing under her breath and reaching out to grab his arm.

"Don't you 'Grandpa' me. Been in worse places. This is a time for action, not to pussy around and wait to die."

The words fell on those gathered like an avalanche. Everyone remained quiet, glancing at one another. There was a heaviness that draped onto the shoulders of each individual. Rick waited for a heartbeat before speaking up again. "Anyone else?"

"I'm not letting my gramps go alone," the woman spoke with a sigh, standing up and looking at Rick with iridescent sky-blue eyes, her expression heavy and tired. The teacher struggled to remember her. She wasn't one of his students, that was for sure. She looked too spunky for him not to remember her. "Name's Catherine, Kat for short. And no, the irony isn't lost on me."

"Welcome aboard, Kat." Rick nodded, turning to the others on the bus. "Anyone else?"

"I'll go." The voice came from right next to the teacher. Tomas, the bespectacled young man, had glimpsed at Kat and then at Rick before nodding firmly. "I'll go," he repeated as if to convince himself.

"... very well, then." With a sense of weariness, the teacher glanced at the rest of the bus. "We're going to need to prep food and water. Doubt we'll have enough for more than a couple days, so if we're not back soon..."

A grim nod.

If they weren't back by then, they'd likely be dead.

It was time to get moving.



Chapter 011 [Rick]

No sooner had Rick stepped out of the bus, he jumped in shock. The whole structure had shuddered with a metallic groan at something landing on top of it. Some of the people inside let out shrieks and cries. A few rushed out, Rick moving further away from the vehicle, wanting to get distance and avoid a potential threat. The chemistry teacher twisted around to check out whatever had made the racket.

It had been none other than the white-haired woman.

She'd hopped onto the upturned chassis. Her scrutinizing gaze was keenly focused upon the dead vehicle, sniffing it and scrunching up her nose in revulsion, turning to the side and continuing her inspection, moving towards the front wheels. Her focus shifted entirely onto the piece of rubber. She poked it with a claw tipped finger.

Rick's eyes widened. "No!"

Her head jerked at attention to him just as her claw dug into the wheel a bit more deeply, as if it were no more than half-melted butter.

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The tire let out the pressurized air with a bang.

Startled, the woman had taken a step back and then roared at the bus. The sound made Rick's blood curdle and his feet root into the ground. In the blink of an eye, she'd shredded not just the offending remains of the tire, but had also twisted the axle with a clean punch. The feline woman looked no less gentle when she punched down against the vehicle's frame twice more, as if to make sure it'd learned its lesson.

The metal whined and bent from each jolt. Rick could hear more shrieks from inside the bus's remnants. His eyes could not be any larger. With each display of power, he could do nothing but stand in awe.

With a snort and a hiss, she hopped off of the bus, lightly kicking it in irritation as she stepped onto the ground. With a shake of her head, her eyes turned to Rick, and her mood instantly improved. Her gaze twinkled with a hidden smile. The feline woman approached with just three bounding steps. The human tensed, shifting his gaze downwards, doing his best to avoid eye-contact. Things felt different from the previous night. The danger was there, but there was an almost familiarity to the way she moved that had lost its threatening edge. This close, now with the presence of daylight? Her complete absence of clothing made it impossible not to notice her every curve, the white scars littering her honeyed skin, the imposing, powerful athletic physique, and the gravitas of her femininity.

But he had just witnessed her shredding a chunk of metal from a bus. Right now, the only emotion within him was distress.

"Mrow," she declared, her closed hand bumping his shoulder.

Rick paused, peering up at her. What did she mean? She bumped his shoulder again- softly, yet with enough force to shake him. The young teacher noticed it was the strap of the knapsack. A quick nod. "Chocolate?"

There was little to be gained from taking the risk. He moved with deliberate patience to make it easy for her to read his every move. He pulled the backpack, opening it up, and drawing out the bag of chocolates. The woman smiled instantly, purring. A hungry smile emerged on her face, beaming from ear to ear. It made Rick want to chuckle as he broke off some for her. He'd been about to slip it into her paws when he saw the traces of oil marring her fur.

Not having any wish to risk finding out whether she'd be happy to have motor oil on her meal or not, he held the piece between his fingers and presented it. His heart pumped hard against his ribs. The image of missing fingers was vivid, and one he didn't want to make a reality. And at the same time, last night she'd proved uninterested in needlessly harming him.

With a brief pause, she leaned forward, trapping the chunk in her mouth and licking his fingers as she gingerly extracted it from his grasp. The woman purred contentedly, the smile widening ever so slightly as she chewed on the

candy. "Chuocrrr," she murmured, parting her pink lips again and suckling on them.

It was with a sense of startled wonder that Rick stared at her. Had she just tried to talk? His brain rushed through the possibilities. If she could speak and learn words, then... then...! No, he froze- no, he shouldn't rush. Patience, he'd earned a fraction of her attention, maybe even trust. Who knew what might come afterwards? He couldn't even guarantee she wouldn't kill him the moment he ran out of the delicious treat.

With a brief nod, he took another piece and offered it to her. The woman repeated the process, suckling on his digits, the rumbling sound that came from within her chest no different from an idle chainsaw waiting to be revved.

The young teacher nodded. "Rick. My name is Rick." He held his palm against his chest. "Rick."

"Mriw?" She pushed her hand against his pectoral. It was a slight push, not even an effort on her part. But it carried the strength to force him a step back. It was like trying to stop a train.

The woman smiled a bit more widely and chuckled as he yelped. The expression was short-lived. She noticed the oil on her paws that had stained his shirt. With a frown and a pout, she turned around and walked off, her tail swishing and her hips swaying to an unheard rhythm. The change of behavior left the human feeling equal parts confused and vexed. Rick closed up the bag and made a mental note to ask for as much of the treat as the others could offer. At least the candy looked like a shortcut towards having her attention and good mood.

"Seems she marked you, huh?" Kat commented as she stepped out of the bus.

The young woman's hair was a dirty blond that was half-haphazardly tied into a messy ponytail that had more hair haplessly left outside than within. Her jacket hung loosely from her small frame, and amusement danced across her face. There was a light giggle to her tone of voice as she pointed at his shirt. It took the young teacher a moment to realize what exactly she was

talking about. Looking down, he saw the feline's grease stained paw had left a dark paw-shaped stain on his shirt. A little sigh escaped him, but he kept from commenting about it.

His attention turned back to the feline. Said creature had quickly started rubbing her paws against some tree-bark in frustration. "Are we ready?" He looked at the others. "I only need to get some food and chocolate, and hopefully she'll tag along."

"Do you have any idea where we're going to?" Mr. Gabriel arched a brow.

"I thought about it for a while. The best direction is likely the one she came from. It's the fuck away from the spider, and she'd be likelier to follow since she likely lives over wherever that leads to." A slight sigh escaped him. "There also might be water in that direction since, well, I'm hoping her place of residence was in that direction."

"Some felines can survive for long periods of time without needing a direct source of water since they can absorb most of the moisture they might need out of their prey." Tomas had approached, nodding once as he'd unleashed the factoid their way. "We don't know how she... works, we might not find drinkable water."

"North is still the better option, I'd say." Mr. Gabriel shrugged.

Rick looked at the older man. "North?"

"Sun set in that direction." He pointed at some of the trees. "Unless the planet doesn't work properly, then that's north." He then pointed in the direction the feline woman had come from.

The young teacher nodded as he rubbed his chin in thought. He had doubts of whether to bring Mr. Gabriel or not. The man was looking rather close to his sixties. Still... it seemed he might know a thing or four. "North it is." Better someone with an idea than someone without.

"Now we only need to convince the big pussy about it." Kat grimaced, making a gagging sound. "Ok, that was bad, even for me. She needs a name."

"Does she have one?" Tomas looked at her in surprise.

"If she does, I don't know it," Rick declared.

"You're her handler and don't know her name? Shame on you, Rick."

"Handler? What!?" He turned to the young woman in full, scowling. "What part of anything so far looks like I'm her 'handler'?"

"You're the one who spent the night all nice and warm, cuddled with her. I figure that's as close to a certification as you'll ever need."

"As good a reasoning as any." Mr. Gabriel shrugged.

"That settles that, you're the official cat-interpreter. First duty is to give her a name since 'cat-lady' is a shitty name to use."

Rick wanted to roll his eyes and groan.

Chapter 012 [Rick]

"We are going to have to push hard, not enough to do much else." Rick scanned the backpacks each had assembled.

"You need more food when you move." Mr. Gabriel shook his head. "So assume we have even less."

"Here's hoping we don't take too long, then." Rick grimaced. Intellectually, it would become a losing battle. Time was against them. He glanced at Mr. Gabriel again, speculating how fast the group would be able to move with him coming along.

They had to find civilization if there were any to be had.

There was a teeny voice in the back of Rick's head, warning him, toying with him as it whispered that maybe, just maybe, there was no one to be found. That there was nothing other than wilderness and monsters. He crushed the idea before it could take root. There was little sense in taking things in that direction. It wasn't as if they had a better chance of surviving by sticking around and waiting for a miracle.

"Double check everything. I'm going to attempt persuading... her to come along. Hopefully, we don't need to worry too much over things on that end." Tossing his backpack at Tomas, he kept the bag of chocolates in his pocket, moving on to approach the white-haired woman.

Said woman was rubbing her paws against the dirt, claws sinking into the soil and splitting it with ease, long thin strips marking the passing of where her natural daggers had opted to aggravate the earth. She was vexed, swiping once or twice, checking her hand, smelling, grimacing, and doing it some more. She'd yet to fully get rid of the grease.

Rick leaned into wisdom and caution. He kept himself well away from the range of her claws by a good extra five meters, instead opting to put himself where she could see him, but not approaching further. As expected, she

noticed him. A quick glance was as much as she needed to confirm he was there, but she did nothing about it. Her focus remained on wanting to remove the smell of car grease from her skin and fur.

A minute, then two, then three. Her clawing was unearthing everything around her, throwing little bits of dirt, dust, and rocks all around. She'd sunk herself a good foot in her insistence of being thorough. It was only after her fur had been caked in light clumpy brown soil that she appeared marginally satisfied. Enough to stop, at least.

"Tough day, huh," Rick commented with a wistful smirk, arms crossed, leaning against the tree and presenting a chunk of chocolate he'd broken off. He was doing his level best to appear relaxed, though he certainly didn't feel it. Another part of him was just grimacing at his attempt to look in control.

The woman pouted, scoffing and shaking her head all in one fluid motion. The glare she shot at the bus was one that would have ignited it... if only she had been gifted with anything other than incredible power and speed. Since the totaled vehicle appeared intent on remaining inert, she huffed.

Rick forced his shoulders to slump, nodding with only the barest bob of his head, gesturing at the others to get slightly closer. He stepped towards her with measured steps, swallowing the lump in his throat and getting within range of her paws while trying to avoid falling down from the new tripping hazard she'd dug out.

He touched his chest, right above where she'd left the stain. "Rick," he said, then pointed at the sweet he was holding onto. "Chocolate." He pointed at her, taking a long second to push out the idea he'd formed earlier. "Monica."

She cocked a brow, reaching out and snagging the chocolate from his fingers with her lips, popping it into her mouth and savoring it with a purr. "Meow," she declared, patting her chest. "Mriw." She pointed at him. "Chuoc." She pointed at his pocket.

Good enough, he guessed. "Monica it is." Rick smiled.

She looked at his face for a moment, tilting her head before she returned the smile.

"This feels like a movie. 'Me girl-Tarzan, you ugly-male-Jane'," Kat commented under her breath, giggling. "Should I get popcorn? Bet she'd love it."

Rick made sure to ignore the comment and keep his eyes on the newly named Monica. He reached out a hand, empty, but gesturing slowly for her to follow. "Let's... go? Come?" He turned towards the forest, in the direction she'd come from originally. Her ears perked up. "Come? Please?"

"You should 'pspsps' her, but pretty sure she'd rip you to shreds."

The young teacher sighed, stepping through the threshold between the clearing and the forest. A chill ran down his spine, all the way to his toes. He took another step, and then one more, glancing over his shoulder at the feline woman. She was looking at him with her head tilted to the side, ears perked and tail lashing behind her. So Rick had to take a slow second to breathe in and continue walking.

He couldn't make her come, not if she didn't follow on her own, but... were there alternatives? His mind drew blanks. "Let's go."

"And if she doesn't follow?" Tomas asked with a whisper.

"We can't force her even if we wanted to," Rick replied, pulling out the half-full bag of chocolate from his pocket and shaking it over his head, praying it'd do the trick. He moved forward another step.

"She's, like, not following," Kat commented with a nudge of nervousness.

It was enough for everyone to stop.

Pausing, Rick glanced at the other three. "What are your thoughts of our chances of survival without her collaboration?"

"Nil," Mr. Gabriel said with a growl. "If we encounter anything like that spider again, we're dead. All of us."

"I... have to agree with Mr. Gabriel."

"I don't wanna be monster food." Kat scowled. The words brought the image from last night through his mind. He blinked slowly as the student looked at him intently. "You... have an idea."

"Maybe, but it's a terrible one. Stay put."

There was a heartbeat of hesitation as he turned towards the feline that had turned away. Turning his way back towards her, he took every step with a growing sense of dread. His back was becoming colder. His fists clenched in determination, and his thoughts returned to last night, to how she'd behaved when caressed and scratched, to the curiosity and eagerness for the sweet treat. His gut was telling him this was the way to go, and he could sense every other part of him telling him it was a horrible, horrible idea.

In his mind's eye, Rick saw the scene unfolding again. Charlie, the spider, and how it might happen to others. Help was sorely needed, and the wild woman, Monica, was the only way he could see their future success. Rick couldn't afford to stop.

The young teacher stood firm, the feline turning to look his way once more. With a frown, he patted his chest. "Rick." He stepped forward, hesitating for a heartbeat, his hand moving towards her. She looked at his palm with a slight frown, for a split second she appeared to observe it rather closely. But she did not move to stop him.

Rick stepped closer still, and patted her shoulder. "Monica." The gesture had come out with a lot less hesitation than he thought it would have.

The feline barely reacted, arching a brow as he pulled out the chocolate, took out a piece, and moved it closer to her. Her eyes focused on it with laser precision, licking her lips. Rick moved it away from her and threw it into his mouth, crunching and chewing in defiance, meeting her gaze with a scowl.

The growl she let out made his stomach do a somersault. But it was too late to lose his nerve. Rick met her gaze, pretending his whole body wasn't about to shake like a leaf. She leaned closer as he chewed. He ignored his racing

heart and waited until her snarl had come close enough he could feel her breath against his face, baring her fangs at him.

It was then that he leaned forward and licked her lips, smearing the chocolate against them. Once, and pulling back to give some space, meeting her eyes and watching closely how she'd react.

It had caught her by surprise, the anger vanished instantly. Confusion followed. She blinked, licking her lips slowly, looking at the human with wide eyes. Monica took an endless moment of silence as she kept her eyes on his own. Rick took the risk, leaning a second time and smearing the rest of the chocolate that remained in his mouth against her lips again. He waited a heartbeat and leaned away, but only managing a single step back before her clawed hand fell onto his hip.

He hesitated as she looked at him more seriously, licking her lips more slowly, frowning. A heartbeat, then another, she let go. The human took another step back and put his hands on his hips, nodded. His heart was racing inside his chest, he turned to leave back into the forest, not waiting for any further reaction.

He was a second away from losing the ability to stop trembling. His hands stuffed into his pockets and hands clenched as he tightened himself, moving, moving because if he stayed still the adrenaline would have him shaking like a leaf.

His thundering heart was trying to creep up his throat, his blood was a racing roller-coaster. But he kept his ears sharp, his attention only focused on his hearing. It was the only thing that matter.

He was waiting, praying.

When he heard Monica yowl and follow close behind, he all but collapsed in relief.

There was hope. Time to go find help.

Chapter 013 [Mark]

Mark Dodson had watched as the teacher and the crazy cat-monster had left into the forest, and he knew that those left in the bus were doomed. It was a simple statement of fact; now that the feline had taken off, the spider monster was likely to come back sooner or later. And when she did, it would be unlikely they'd have a way to scare her off.

Being near the feline was a death sentence, but so was staying here, away from it.

Within the stuffy darkness of the totaled bus, Mark had kept himself focused monitoring the others, especially the teachers and older adults that pretended they had a clue what was going on. There was an air of self-importance that they were keeping as they tried to convince the others everything was under control.

Now that they were distracted talking over what to do next, there was no time to lose.

Moving fast, Mark stuffed some extra food into his backpack while glancing around at the various survivors that were in varying states of shock. He paid closer scrutiny to those that were talking with one another in loud tones and wide, angry gestures. The last thing he needed was to draw attention.

Most of all, he was keeping an eye out for the woman that called herself his step-mother. She was likely to prove the biggest obstacle if he gave her the chance.

"Barry." He threw a half-empty bag at his brother, the young man had been looking down at a phone with a broken screen. "We're leaving."

That snapped him quick out of it. "Wha-? Are you crazy!?"

The younger sibling raised his voice. It made Mark flinch as it caught the ears of several people around them all at once. The first one to react was the

old crone of a woman that had invaded their lives for too long.

"Going somewhere, young man?" The sound was irritating, nails over chalk. Mark belatedly turned to look at her. The half-decrepit woman almost appeared to step out of the shadows on the bus. The leather mask she called a face was a stretched raisin hidden behind a pair of half-moon glasses, leathery pale skin, her hair was a soggy wet black ball of fur that'd been left to dry for too long under the sun. If she ever had the ability to smile, it was surely lost over a decade ago.

Mark kept from grinding his teeth, his lips stuck on a downward curve. "I was going to help find aid. Maybe food."

"Whatever made you think you'd be of any use?"

His hands clenched slightly. He glared at her, at the woman whose very presence was likely no worse than an ill omen. His blood began to simmer. "At least I'm at least not as you."

Her bony palm slapped him faster than he realized she'd done so, for a woman that looked like she belonged behind glass, she was surprisingly quick. His eyes widened in shock at the dismissive glare she'd given him, her face almost furious enough to turn red- an otherwise near impossible feat considering the amount of makeup she wore.

"Mark!" Barry lunged to step between the two, glancing at the older woman. "He didn't mean that, could we stop fighting?"

A snarl came upon Mark's lips that interrupted any further words out of his brother. The eldest Dodson sibling would have pushed things were the situation a different one, but there was no reason to. "I'm going to head out, and I'm going to be searching for food and help. Unless you plan to stop me, get out of my way."

Rather than wait for a response, he shoved forward, pushing the old hag to the side and making his approach to the front of the bus. His steps came to a halt as Ms. Smith walked his way, the young teacher giving him a pleading look. "Give me one minute, Mark, just one."

"Why?"

"I can't let you leave alone."

"Then make me."

"I can't do that either, please, just one minute. There are others that can help, I'm sure." She looked at him with those deep green eyes and an asking, quiet expression, her hands reaching to clasp his own tightly. The gesture surprised Mark, who was unable to remember when the young psychology teacher had ever gotten this close to him before.

With a grunt, he pulled his hand out of her reach, looking over his shoulder at the old woman and Barry. "Fine." He dropped the glow as he strode out of the vehicle, ignoring the near hostile looks some of the others were giving him.

The air outside didn't help calm him much- not when he could see a literal line-up of corpses just a couple dozen meters away. How much longer until they'd rot and bloat and decay? How long until their stench drew in other things like the spider or the cat? Mark looked the other way, reaching for his pocket and pulling out a cigarette. That damn crazy teacher hadn't proposed to bury the dead, it was infuriating in its own way.

"Need a light?"

The voice made him turn his head, glancing at the young woman offering her neon pink lighter. He rolled his eyes, pulling out his zippo, a simple gray worn-out metal thing that had been scratched to hell and back. A quick puff and he felt the bitter relief of nicotine.

"Alrighty then."

She raised a delicately trimmed brow, pocketing her own and peeking at him for a moment, leaning against the bus chassis and taking a drag of the cig. Quietly, she swung her attention away, and Mark's eyes took the chance to trail up and down her body. A part of him was trying to confirm whether he should know her from somewhere.

There was something aloof about how her long black hair seemed to cascade around her head and into a lazy ponytail. Her face was pale. There were traces of Asian descent, but Mark couldn't pin them down to anything specific. What he was sure of was that he didn't recognize her from anywhere. "What're you studying?"

She glanced at him, giving him a corner of her eye worth of attention. "Psych. You?"

"Admin."

"So the simple crap."

"Whatever got me somewhere else." A shrug, and quiet. "Name's Mark."

"I am aware." She let out a little chuckle.

"Yours?"

"I guess you'll have to find out."

The redhead snorted, shaking his head. Well, the minute was up. He turned towards the bus, hearing the muttering inside and not very much liking the tone. The young man spared a thought to Barry. He did not want his younger brother stuck here, even less with the harpy. But he also wasn't about to force him to follow along. It would be impossible to, anyway. That one was going to bite him.

"They're about done."

Mark's attention returned to the black-haired woman. "What?"

"I can hear them talk, the old prune is trying to stop your bro."

"You can... Wait, you know who my brother is?"

"Hard to miss the hair." She laughed with a soft lilt to her voice, gesturing at his head. "I'm in his class." Her lips parted ever so slightly. "Why did you come on the field trip? Would've thought you took it already last year."

"Barry didn't tell me the prune was coming."

"Family trouble?"

"None of your business."

"Hey, don't mind me, I'm just looking forward to poking into that head of yours." Her voice lilted. "Psych students just looove to mess around with everyone's heads, hadn't you heard?"

"Yeah, well, keep your bullshit to yourself. I don't need any of it."

The words only prompted her to laugh a little, nodding but not adding further comment. She took a long drag of her cig, the gesture reminding Mark he still had one of his own. The redhead's gaze kept flickering at the currently nameless young woman, his foot tapping against the ground as he mentally counted down the seconds.

Ms. Smith stepped out of the bus, glancing around with an expression of desperation that turned into reassurance as she locked onto Mark. "Barry insisted on coming along with you, but don't push him, he hurt his ankle."

At least the brotherly sentiment wasn't one-sided. "Yeah, sure, whatever, we're burning daylight." Snorting, he crossed his arms. "Who else is coming with?"

"Five others, safety in numbers."

"Six."

Ms. Smith turned her attention to the raven haired woman as the latter dropped her cigarette and stepped on it. "I'll be coming along."

"But you are a-"

"Young independent woman capable of taking care of herself?" The nameless woman arched a brow. "I also know a thing or two about hunting."

The psychology teacher hesitated, nodding after a moment of consideration.
"I can't stop you, Veronica."

"Ah, fuck, I hoped to keep the mystery going for longer."

Mark glanced at her, cracking a half grin. "Welcome to the team, Veronica."

Chapter 014 [Mark]

Mark walked with a strange sense of existing within an alien world. The forest was quiet; the trees loomed from above, spires casting deep shadows all around them. It reminded him of walking through downtown after dark, it might have held some more eeriness to it if not for the company.

Some douche named Daniel had self-assigned himself the position of "leader" of the people who'd left in search for food and/or help. Tall, lanky, and with a growing bald-spot on his head, the man had claimed it without hesitation as the only teacher in the "team", he'd just kept insisting on being the one to tell the others what had to be done, and how. No one cared to tell him that walking at the front of the others also meant potentially being the first to meet any possible monster that crossed their path.

Mark was more focused on Barry. His younger brother had a limp he was trying to hide. But it was clear he was slowing down the others. That fact made Mark wonder whether it'd been the best idea. He did not wish to leave his sibling with the hag, but more importantly, he didn't want to leave him in that deathtrap. But the limp was worrying, he hoped it would be manageable.

"If not for the hair, I'd have a hard time believing you're brothers."

"We get that a lot." Barry quickly smiled at Veronica. "We have different mothers."

"So the one back there...?"

"Not really any of your business." Mark hissed, peering at the dark-haired woman and scowling.

"She's just asking... and she's our aunt, it's complicated."

"No, no, Mark's right, it wasn't my place to ask." She wasn't apologetic, just twirling a lock of hair, glancing around the forest. "What do you figure the next thing we encounter will be?"

"Next?"

"You know, there was that spider that ate glasses-guy. Then the bat that got eaten by the cat. Then the cat. I'm betting on hogs." A slight smirk followed. "Hog women, or maybe there's going to be a male monster sometime soon?"

The younger Dodson grimaced, becoming pale. "Are you serious?"

"Why wouldn't I be? Don't you ever get those flights of fancy of wanting to go someplace else? We ARE someplace else. This is as weird and wild as it gets." A cackle left her, the sound bouncing all around them.

"Not like this." Barry shook his head with haste.

Mark rolled his eyes. Not that he could escape Veronica's attentive gaze. "And you?"

"Waste of time to think about that."

"Not like we have better things to do." She shrugged, but didn't push for conversation any further.

The elder brother's attention shifted away from her and Barry, turning to the rest of the group. There was an air of nervousness, their eyes peeled and attempting to look into the woods, there was something almost funny of how clear it was they wished to be able to see through the wood of the massive tree trunks. The amusement was interrupted when Mark heard a hissing sound, looking over his shoulder, he noticed Veronica had stopped and pulled out a... can of spray paint? She'd drawn a single line across the tree trunk, bright yellow and a glaring contrast to the brown and dark greens of the forest all around.

"What's that for?"

"It's easy to get disoriented in a forest you don't know." A shrug. "Besides, if we can't make it back, it could be a good way for the rescue team to find our bodies."

"What... about the smell?"

Barry's words got an arched brow out of Veronica. "It'll dissipate soon enough. And it's not going to get far with how stale the air is." She dismissed his concern with a wave of her hand, drawing a line on the next tree.

"Experience hunting, huh?"

"Just a little." She shook the spray can. "Not that I'd thought of using this for something actually useful."

"You were going to graffiti at the mountain?"

"It's a tradition." Veronica chuckled. "Sophs get the trip to the big rock, and the ones looking for some fun find the fuck-cave. Then they do the do and paint their names there."

Barry stuttered and blushed, looking the other way and scratching his head with awkwardness. Mark hid his frown as he noted the mirth in the young woman's lips as her gaze become distant for a second. He wasn't sure what to make of her, there was something that certainly felt out of place about her.

"And... you came with someone?" The younger sibling's question rung in the air as he kept his gaze lowered.

"Meh, doesn't matter anymore."

Not wanting to bother himself with the conversation, Mark returned his focus to the forest that surrounded them. The roots were a hassle when it came to walking, too clear a tripping hazard if one didn't pay attention. Thick and large, the trees looked like someone had wanted to make the plant life as big as they could, and then some. And this size kept feeling too out of place, his eyes looking upwards every other second, like some damn tourist lost in a big city, every skyscraper a new sight to behold.

Except these were more dangerous, holding unseen threats he was certain he didn't want to meet. Not that he'd be given a choice. Would some other spider drop out of the trees without them noticing? Had that been a rustle? Movement? Or just the wind? Was it something else? It made Mark want to

frown, squint, stop, and stare. But he couldn't really do that with every single twitch that frayed his nerves.

His only sense of reassurance lay at the bottom of his backpack, a distinct weight, heavy, and metallic. He'd thought of bringing it out and keeping it in his pocket, but there was little use there. It might fall, or worse, it might draw the attention from the others, and then a fight might break out.

"Yeah, I'm nervous too."

Barry reached out to clench Mark's shoulder, the younger, paler sibling putting up a reassuring smile. The sound of crunching twigs was all that could be heard for a very long second.

"You're always afraid."

"Shut up."

Chuckling, Mark shot an upward look one more time, staring at the glimpses of blue sky from between the tree tops that stood at what felt the edge of the sky. It took him a long moment before he frowned slightly. "I wonder if there'd be any way to climb these and get a good vantage point."

Veronica glanced up and whistled. "Not unless you plan to spend a day or two doing it."

"Two days? Seriously?"

"These things look two hundred meters tall, maybe more. Two days might be a low-ball unless you're good at it and don't need to sit down to recover your strength every handful of minutes." Her gaze flickered at Barry at that last comment, the younger sibling didn't notice it.

"What, you a rock-climber as well?" Mark snorted.

"My ex was, wouldn't shut up about it. Guess some things stuck even though he kept boring me to death."

"So you're... single?" Barry paused.

Veronica rolled her eyes, stepping past the shorter sibling, moving ahead and twirling her black hair. Mark glanced at Barry and sighed, slapping the back of his younger brother's head.

"What?" The younger man asked in confusion, not receiving an answer from either party.

They kept walking.

Chapter 015 [Rick]

The further Rick and the others walked from the clearing the bus had crash-landed into, the darker things had become. The sounds of people had been replaced with silence one voice at a time until there was nothing to even hint of the existence of the survivors at all. There was a loud absence of noise that stretched out around them. The trees were so large tunnels could've been made through them, and in their massiveness, their very presence appeared to scare sound into muteness. Despite the suffocating size of the wooden giants, they all walked quite aware that the most dangerous thing they could find in the woods was right next to them.

The feline woman had initially followed in curiosity, approaching Rick from time to time and bumping against him before moving away. But that had turned into boredom soon enough, her attention moving away from the humans and to everything around them. There was always something that would make her ears twitch and head turn to focus on seemingly random spots in the gloom under the trees.

Heading Northward had not quite been a simple a task as they'd thought. There was nothing but forest and barely any shrubbery or thickets. The only obstacles in their way were the trees themselves and their massive roots, that were sometimes thicker than entire vehicles. They were wooden webs that snaked across the ground like a tangled mess of worms. More than once they'd seen the many holes and empty spaces underneath some of the roots, tiny caverns Monica was more than eager to sniff at from time to time to confirm there was nothing within.

Several times they had to detour around a web of roots they did not trust to hold them from whatever hole nature held beneath. Only Tomas' phone dared peer into the blackness under the trees, only ever finding dirt and moss. Still, to the young teacher, those shadows always left an eerie sense of being watched from the shadows.

"Can you hear that?" Tomas said in a hushed whisper.

Everyone stopped, looking around, tense. No sooner had they halted than Rick realized the forest had not been quiet- far from it. The branches groaned with the breeze that blew above, the columns of wood swaying a little nearer to the top. There were cracks and groans, splintering sounds that rumbled deep.

It took a second for Rick to realize what they were hearing. A deep sigh left him and he nodded, relaxing his shoulders. "It's normal."

"Fucking creepy is what it is." Kat hissed.

"It's the sound of the forest," the teacher spoke, shaking his head. "Is this your first time hearing them?"

"Like, where the fuck could I have heard 'the sound' of a forest with trees taller than... than... do you figure these suckers are taller than a skyscraper?"

"Wouldn't be surprised." Mr. Gabriel glanced up for a moment.

"Forests are like that. I'm more concerned that I've barely heard any birds," Rick pointed out.

"Mrow?" the feline's voice rang out as she stopped, her eyes hanging on them as the conversation unfolded.

"The cat's calm," Mr. Gabriel pointed out. "If there's a threat somewhere, you can bet she'll see it coming before any of us."

The proclamation made Rick want to point out there could be many things that could be dangerous to them, but not to Monica. But he kept the words to himself. There was little sense in making them needlessly nervous. Instead, he glanced at the feline woman, and she looked back at him with those wide, curious eyes that focused on him like a laser. The human found himself unable to look away. Only a cough from Mr. Gabriel broke him out of the spell. "Let's get moving, we can't waste time here."

With little commentary to be added, the four went back to their hike.

The young teacher tried to distract himself by paying closer attention to his surroundings. Perhaps he'd be able to notice something that might be of help.

The smell of crushed pine and dirt had a staleness to it that came tinged with touches of something that Rick couldn't quite put into words. It tickled the back of his throat and nudged the front of his mind towards images of the spider and Charlie. But he pushed it away, focusing on the here and now. He would not let himself become lost in thought.

The intent to focus lasted a whole ten seconds before Monica bolted forward without apparent reason.

Everyone froze as the feline woman jumped onto the nearby tree and, with her claws scratching at the bark, clawed her way upwards with such ease it almost appeared gravity did not exist for her. In seconds, she'd risen at least a dozen meters or so and was still going.

"What the...?"

All eyes turned to the treetops, entranced by the ease with which she moved, and following her climb up and up and up. When she'd reached the first branches, she used them to sprint towards the next tree over. She was moving even faster now, her speed allowing her to jump farther, vanishing out of sight.

"The fuck was that about?"

"Keep moving," Rick said, his voice was strained, a barked-out command.

"I mean, if..."

"No. Move," the teacher pressured, meeting Tomas' eyes without hesitation. "If she went up there because there's some other monster, the last thing we need is to be nearby if things go south."

"Do you reckon there might be something out here that can kill her?" Mr. Gabriel rubbed his chin in apparent amusement.

"Do any of us want to stay and find out?"

That did the trick. The others shared grim nods of determination and sped up as best they could. Everyone kept an eye up above, eyes darting between the branches and trying to spot Monica or anything else that might be there. Whatever the case may be, only the groaning trees and ruffling branches met them.

Their insistence to speed up made it all the clearer Mr. Gabriel was not going to be able to keep up for long. The man's steps were weathered, steady, and slow. He'd yet to start breathing hard, but he would have lagged behind if not because Tomas and Rick were matching his pace. The consideration pressed the teacher into a narrowing scowl and thinning lips. He wouldn't want to have to leave anyone behind if it could be avoided...

"Tomas, if things get rough, do you think you can carry Mr. Gabriel?"

"I mean, I-"

"Over my dead body." The growl escaped the older man as he glared at Rick.

"Sorry to pop the bubble, gramps, but if we need to run, I will drag you myself."

"Then I'm better-"

"I will, like, stay right next to you. Whether you move or not." This time the words came with crossed arms and a complete stop of her steps.

Mr. Gabriel met his granddaughter's gaze in full. The entire group stopped as they looked at one another in silence. Kat's dirty blond hair moved almost as if it had a breeze of its own as she met the older man's eyes. She was the first one to hesitate and look away. They might have impressed Rick had he not been considering how to push them both to keep moving.

"Um... everyone?"

Tomas' tone drew the others to follow his finger up above. A shadow was moving through the forest, bouncing its way from one tree to the next. It was tumbling its way down from, slowing its descent with every branch it

touched in its trajectory towards the ground. Rick recognized the snowy hair and white fur and relaxed ever so slightly, watching Monica roll, claw, and hop from branch to branch, from tree to tree. She would've put acrobats to shame.

With an impossible grace, she landed on the forest floor, not making so much as a sound.

In her right hand was... a bird, or the feathery remains of one. Blood was splattered all around her paws, and the avian's head was missing. It surprisingly looked like a normal bird, if slightly larger than Rick would've expected it to be. The feline was smiling from ear to ear as she bit down on a part of the animal's exposed neck and ripped out a chunk for her to chew on. The crunch of bone made them wince. She appeared to be enjoying it.

That explained the silence of the birds, at least.

Make a sound and Monica will find you.

The feline glanced at them, pausing as her eyes lingered on each of them in turn. Those same blue-green eyes paused on Rick's own.

They must have met some criteria she had in mind, because she called out to them. "Mrow," she spoke with a simple sound, moving ahead of the group, stopping, and then walking to some spot slightly to the right of the direction they'd been taking. Her eyes remained fixed on them.

The four humans shared glances.

"I think she wants us to follow," Rick muttered.

Chapter 016 [Rick]

Rick found himself having a hard time seeing the path they walked. The sun had passed the zenith, and it was on its way towards the horizon. Not that there was one to be seen in the woods. The gloom was quick to set in, and it didn't seem as if they had much longer before their only option was to use a flashlight. A rather strange thing, considering how they could look up and still see the glimmering orange sunlight that painted the very edge of the treetops. If he had to make a rough assumption, they only had another hour or so left.

On the plus side, they appeared to have a guide. Monica was leading the way, moving ahead and stopping to meow at them every handful of minutes, taking the time to lazily snack on the bird she'd caught earlier. None present would complain about that though- better some small animal than them.

"Look." Kat pointed forward.

It was simple to see what she'd been looking at. There were scratch marks on the tree she was pointing at, thin light lines that stripped away chunks of bark and revealed deeper scars. She might have spotted the first, but as soon as they'd noticed them, they noticed the marks were all over the place. The scratches looked like graffiti that had been painted at the base of a building, sometimes small, other times stretching all the way around the monumental trunks.

"I think we're entering her territory."

Rick's comment came accompanied by a gesture of his head towards another tree, one that found itself also injured with lacerations and torn bark. This one was scarred all the way up to the first branch, twelve meters off the ground. As they moved further, following Monica, the frequency and intensity of the markings grew. What at first had been light scratches had become entire portions of the massive trees, stripped away and gouged out, barely any bark remaining within the first twenty meters of wood. In some places,

the marks almost seemed to follow a pattern, a path that spiraled its way up the trunk. How many hours must she have spent on this?

"Felines often do these things to keep their nails sharp," Tomas muttered under his breath. There was an edge of fascination in his voice.

"Kitty likes having big things to scratch, huh." Kat chuckled.

Rick nodded a little, turning his attention away from the gouged out trees and noticing the terrain was slightly different from an hour ago. What had once been mostly flat was increasing in its incline. The trees were also becoming smaller and younger, their presence appearing to wane and recede if at a pace one would have missed had they not been paying attention. Was there a hill or a mountain up ahead? It was very hard to be sure from where they were standing down on the ground. And with the increasing incline, it was starting to get harder to keep the pace.

"Mrow!" Monica called out from a branch, looking down at them as she cleaned up her claws, licking her paw and shooting them some annoyed look of impatience.

"Do you figure she'll eat us?" Kat said with a hushed whisper, her tone only held the barest hint of seriousness.

"I still don't know anywhere else we might sleep for the night. At least not anywhere safer."

"Nor more dangerous," Mr. Gabriel replied. His face was an unreadable mask.

Rick couldn't answer that, there was little sense to trying, anyway. He leaned forward and pushed himself to continue in the direction the feline was signaling them to follow. The teacher wondered how much longer they'd have to follow the feline woman, they'd already had to stop to let Mr. Gabriel catch his breath twice. Was it really her lair? He hoped so- to a point at least, his mind moved towards what they might have to do afterwards. For now, some place to rest was the best thing they could find.

In his upward hike of the aggravating terrain, Rick spotted several felled trees. A rather surprising sight, to be sure. Their trunks were perhaps twice his height and looked half rotten. They lay one beside the other. Their bark had been long since stripped away, and every inch of it was scoured with claw marks. Something about that made him frown, but whatever he was thinking was pushed to the side when he heard a new voice.

A shriek. Female, meek, a cry for help.

Rick froze, turning back towards his companions. Kat looked more startled than scared. Ahead? He frowned, moving faster, breaking through some thicket, and stopping as soon as he spotted the entrance of a cave. The sound had come from within. The young teacher could only frown and keep his distance as the others approached him, all four unable to look away from the cave as the shrieking became louder before becoming quiet entirely.

Monica stepped out of the large hole, showing a wide catty smile as she purred, sitting down right next to the entrance. From within, they could hear a soft sobbing that was came in slow wheezes. With Monica having planted her butt next to the cave, the group had paused, sharing concerned looks with one another.

Slowly they approached, paying close attention to Monica's reaction. The feline ignored the group and stretched, licking at her paws with determination. She looked at the four humans, smugness seeping through those emerald-blue eyes. "Meow." She proclaimed, returning to her self-grooming.

"I think... she's inviting us in," Rick said, the first of the group to step forward, approaching with measured steps.

Monica didn't twitch or react to his movements, only glancing at him smugly as he peered within the gloom of the cavern as best he could without stepping inside. The hole wasn't too deep- only ten or so meters and low enough he'd have to crouch to go inside. But the incline was soft enough to make it easy to move in and out. But that was of little concern. Something else had his attention. In the darkness of dirt and rock, Rick spotted the shadows of a figure curled up and sobbing. "I think there's someone else here."

That pushed the others to move closer. Tomas hurried to the front, pulling out his phone and flashing a light. Within the cave, the person shrieked in a low whimper and balled up as tightly as she could. It was with this new source of illumination that Rick could see the figure in better detail.

It was a waifish woman, strange and different in much the same ways as all the other monsters he'd seen so far.

She was small, mousy in more ways than just her apparent meter thirty stature. Pale and trembling, a set of round ears adorned the top of her head, scarred, chipped, and torn. With her back presented to the group, it was easy to see the long whip-like pink tail that protruded out of her spine, at least a meter long, and curled up against her. Her body was covered in dirt, bruises, and half-closed lacerations. A few of them were relatively fresh, the wounds clearly no more than a day or two old. Others were scarred, but looking a strange deep purple color, as if someone had dyed it with ink. Rick had little doubt the front was no different. By the looks of it, she'd been either tortured or beat up again and again.

This new woman sobbed, trembling like a leaf. Squeaks and whimpers escaped her with every shudder.

"This is wrong." Mr. Gabriel spoke with a deep scowl, his hands closed into white-knuckled fists.

"Rick, this..." Kat spoke with a horrified whisper, covering her mouth and looking at the curled up mouse woman that dared not move from her spot.

The young chemistry teacher gulped, turning to look at the feline that was currently licking her razor-sharp claws. Her tongue lapped between her digits, removing the blood from her fur, and her eyes fixed upon him with a firm determination. The smile on her lips widened, showing her sharp fangs and amused blue-green gaze.

A sinking suspicion emerged. The weapons she wielded... "Did... Monica do this?" Tomas spoke the words, sending a wave of cold dread over everyone.

"I think we might have fucked up."

Chapter 017 [Rick]

With the discovery of the mouse girl, things had become tense. Everyone knew who was the one responsible for the state the young creature was in. Rick could only look at Monica's smiles with a sense of looming dread hanging overhead. Would this also be their fate if the feline happened to change her mind about them? Or was this part of her plan already?

Rick glanced into the cave. Mr. Gabriel sat within, near the mortified young woman. The older man was stoic, silent, his back was a straight column of stone. Before him lay some bread and ham. He sat a meter away from the mouse, as close as he could get, before she started sobbing again.

And he'd not moved an inch since.

"Really hope we can find help... out there, somewhere." Kat was the first to move, sitting down at the mouth of the cave, legs crossed, and slumping down against the dirt. Her gaze flickered to Monica. "Would really be a shitter of a time if we can't even get running water."

The change in subject was a welcome one.

Rick felt a twinge of nervousness at the prospect. What kind of world would there be out there that had survived against creatures such as Monica or the Arachnae? Something was fundamentally different in this world. It was becoming clearer with each passing minute. He wasn't sure he wanted to stick around to find out all the details. He needed to help put everyone to safety and fast.

"Don't concern yourselves with the 'what ifs'. Survival comes first," Mr. Gabriel spoke, his voice soft, barely a whisper. It helped them focus, nodding, though only for long enough to watch as the old man moved himself an inch further.

"Gramps...?"

"Shush," he replied, getting closer to the mouse and stopping as soon as she'd twitched. He moved the food to lie next to her and then turned his back to her. There was a harshness to his brow as he glanced at the others. "I'll stay here."

Kat hesitated. "Are you sure that's... safe?"

"Does it matter?" The response was cut and dry.

The declaration made them take a long moment of silence, giving shared glances and nervous grimaces. Tomas nodded, moving towards the side of the cave, away from the mouse and Mr. Gabriel, but sitting down and leaning against the wall. Sighing, he removed his glasses while holding the backpack tightly against his chest.

The young student kept glancing at the mouse and tightening his grip on the backpack. There was something in his eyes that was troubled.

A part of Rick wanted to speak up, but there wasn't much he could say. He moved to the opposite side of the cavern and took point near where Monica sat. If the feline was going to move, he'd be the first in line. Much to his surprise, that was exactly what she did, standing up and moving closer to the young teacher, laying down next to him. With a smirk, she placed her head on his lap.

He looked at her in a moment of confusion. It redoubled when she took his hand and moved it to the top of her head.

Kat broke out in laughter, giggling and covering her mouth as she watched the young teacher's startled expression. The lilt of her voice became only more musical as Rick patted Monica's head, easing himself into scratching her ears and focusing on calming himself down.

She began to purr, leaning into his touch and closing her eyes.

"You figure she'll let us live so long as she gets good scratches?" Kat couldn't help herself, smirking as the chemistry teacher glared at her.

"Let's keep hoping she remains amused and we don't wake up to find out her favorite pass-time is making people into scratching posts."

That sobered Kat quite quickly. With a grimace, she turned away, standing up and moving towards Tomas. She sat down next to him, the young man jolting as she leaned into him. "My turn."

"What?"

"My turn. That cat over there is getting a head scratch. This Kat here wants the same."

"Erm..." Tomas hesitated, looking at Rick and Mr. Gabriel before glancing at Kat once more.

She smirked. "Like, just trust me, I've got an idea."

"Are you...?"

"Do it, you nerd. I think I know how I can help with the Monica thing."

That proclamation made for an even stranger look from the others. The pressure mounted until Tomas couldn't help but nod.

Removing the backpack from his thighs and cramming his glasses back on. The young man looked at Kat and turned away as she mimicked Monica's position, leaning down to place her head on his lap. She wriggled a bit to get comfortable.

When the young man reached down to touch her dark blond hair, she hummed, letting out a breathy sigh that made the Tomas hesitate. It was short lived. Kat tapped on his leg until he got back to it. His fingers drew circles across her scalp, and she let out a quiet cooing sound, meeting Monica's gaze.

"See that kitty cat? I'm liking this," she whispered. Slowly, the woman grasped Tomas' free hand and tugged at it, drawing it to her shoulder. "Now, relax." Still holding on to that free hand, she slowly tugged it from her shoulder, down towards her chest, leaving his palm atop her shirt.

"Kat?" The young man had pulled his palm away as if burned, blushing up a storm.

The young woman grumbled. "Shut it and follow my lead."

"I agree with him, young lady," Mr. Gabriel growled under his voice.

"Shush, she's watching." She waved the older man off, focusing on Monica.

That brought any commentary to a halt as they collectively shifted attention to the white-haired woman. Monica's gaze was laser focused on the two humans. There was an intensity to it, as she was indeed paying very close attention. The feline's white tail waved slowly behind her, her ears perked and aimed at the two. Her movements would slow as Kat would let out cooing sounds, more so when the young woman pulled Tomas' hand against her chest, forcing a little squeeze.

"Oh, that feels so good," she groaned, biting her lower lip and shooting Monica a wink as she turned to look at Tomas. Her hands reached up to clasp the sides of his furiously blushing face.

Tomas could not be any redder, his body stiff, and his eyes wide. It was not until she'd grasped the back of his head and tugged him to bend down that he appeared to grow even stiffer.

"Relax, this should help us with the big kitty over there." Kat glanced over at Monica, a light red appearing on her own cheeks as she then turned back towards Tomas with lascivious eyes. Her intent was clear as she pulled the young man's face closer to her own.

The young woman appeared entirely ignorant or uncaring of Mr. Gabriel's glare, but Tomas was far less so. The young man was growing paler the closer she got.

AWWWOOOOOOOO

Everyone twitched and stopped at the sound that pierced through the silence. It was distant, barely audible, it left everyone very suddenly straining their

ears to determine if there was anything more to it. Rick had tried to spring to his feet but failed. His lap was still currently occupied. His focus turned towards the distance, into the dark forest, frowning and feeling his shoulders rise with tension.

"Do you think..."

ROOOOOOAR

They all twitched at once. Rick jumped, then yelped as he found himself being clutched tightly by Monica. The feline had let out the sound from her position laying on his lap. It wasn't as ear shattering as the one from the previous night, but it had forced every nerve on the man's body to fire off at once.

Her grip on him relented as he fell and smacked against the cave entrance. She grumbled, standing up now that her cushion of choice was gone. She turned to the forest and roared a second time, and moved to sit down at the edge of the cave. Monica huffed and crossed her arms, glaring at the trees, lower lip tight in irritation.

"Guess that's that." The young teacher sighed, breathing deeply to get his beating heart under control.

"The sound came from... isn't that the direction the bus is from?" Tomas asked, glancing into the darkness as well.

The question was like a knife, cutting through the silence. "Should we, like...?" Kat had dropped the coy act, looking nervously at each of them.

"No," Mr. Gabriel spoke gruffly, shaking his head. "We have no way of helping."

"But... Monica?"

"We don't know if she'd fight or not." Rick nodded along, glancing at Tomas as he asked the question. "It's also getting dark. We'd be blind. We would be a burden at best, a risk at the worst."

The four of them lowered their gazes slightly. Kat clasped her hands together and closed her eyes. The gesture earned a quiet shake of the head from Mr. Gabriel. The older man glancing over his shoulder at the shivering mouse. Tomas' gaze lingered on Kat as she quietly prayed. And Rick's eyes lingered on the annoyed feline as she curled up next to the cave and fell asleep.

It felt like it was going to be a long night ahead of everyone else.

Chapter 018 [Alice]

Alice Smith had always considered herself a calm woman. Teaching had certainly put a damper on that impression, but it had never really made it go away. She had studied hard, spent a considerable amount of time to become a teacher within the field of psychology. Her friends always joked she'd jumped into it because she wasn't snobbish enough to open up her own office. She'd never admit they hadn't been too far from the mark. She could spend an entire afternoon explaining how and why the stages of grief and loss were misunderstood and how they were perpetuating the myth. But put her in front of an actual grieving person and attempt to help them through their loss? To give encouragement to a man that was laying in what might become their deathbed? It was terrifying.

What if she messed up? What if she made things worse?

The thoughts bubbled and broiled inside Alice's head as she sat next to the pale, shaking student, holding his clammy icy hand between hers. A part of her wished she at least knew more about medicine. She didn't know what was wrong with Ryan Ortiz. She knew he was cold, that he had lost consciousness several times, and that his pulse came in fast and shallow. She knew that, without professional medical attention, he'd die.

And Alice Smith had nothing she could do about it. Sitting inside the upturned vehicle, clutching his hand, there was a tightness within her chest.

"Everything will be alright," she said, whispers that felt hollow.

Of those that were incapacitated, Ryan was the only one that was visibly deteriorating. The others sported injuries, big ones, bleeding ones that had stopped but left the victims weakened. The teacher used the first aid kit and spare clothes... and patience. They were stable, groaning, barely conscious, but stable. Alice's fingers tightened around Ryan's clammy grip. The young man was not responsive past soft moans of pain.

Alice's mind kept moving back to the stages of grief, the many bitter debates she had over the subject. She could almost imagine the ringing voices and heated words as arguments and counter-arguments were tossed into the wind.

There was a soft beeping from her pocket. Her phone, an alarm she'd set up earlier. It was a reminder she couldn't and shouldn't remain there for too long without moving or eating. It was just too easy to become lost in thought to avoid looking into the things that were happening around her.

It was more of an effort than she had thought it to be to let go of Ryan's hand and stand up. The inside of the bus was dark, night had fallen and the air still felt heavy on her shoulders. Alice's steps were a slow shuffle to the pile of backpacks where most of their food remained. With the aid of her phone as a substitute flashlight, she sifted through the Tupperware and found a sandwich wrapped in aluminum.

She didn't know who the previous owner was, nor did she let herself think much about it. She tried her best to find enjoyment in the damp bread, stale lettuce, and the lukewarm cheese and ham. There might have been a hint of mustard, but she'd barely detected it, washing it all down with some water instead.

Her eyes fell upon the young woman sitting on the inside of the entrance to the bus. The sight made Alice's gut tighten into a knot. May, the sibling of an unfortunate student who'd fallen prey to the spider-creature. Not a word had left the chestnut haired woman since then. May sat with her good arm wrapped around her knees, she'd remained quiet, deathly so, looking into the distance.

With a grimace, the psychology teacher moved to sit next to her. She couldn't let herself give up. "Did you eat?" The response was a silent shake of the head. "Hungry?" A second one.

At least she was responding to the stimulus. Alice leaned against the wall to try to distract herself from the feeling of looming chaos that hung around them. She could tell the others were no less weary and just as tired. But there wasn't much she could do about it, not like this, not here.

It was like watching a boiler that was slowly heating up, the pressure silently climbing one bit at a time. And no release.

The psychology teacher hugged herself, looking down and tightening her grip. Her thoughts wandered to memories of home. A warm bed, a hot meal, a comforting hug from Arnold waiting for her. A tightness gripped her stomach. Arnold. It had been over a day. He was surely going crazy with worry by now. He always worried a lot. The memory brought a slight upward quirk to her lips. It was a reassuring warmth that fell onto her shoulders, something she wanted to look out and hope for.

She was fooling herself, in part. She knew the delusions of hope and its functions in extreme situations. Just because she understood the process involved in these feelings didn't mean she saw no need to partake in them. She was certain it would do more harm than good to cling to some glimmer of a potential rescue. Right now, she needed something to give her strength to push forward.

With a nod of determination, she turned towards May.

"Here." She offered the candy-bar she'd been keeping in her pocket. "You should eat, you need the energy."

The young woman shook her head, tightening her arms into hugging herself more tightly. Her figure almost appeared to shrink as she did this. With her head lowering, the young woman kept her silence.

That made the psychology teacher grimace ever so slightly, taking a moment to consider how else she could help. What else she could say to convince her student to... live. At least in this she should have better odds to be useful than if she were applying medicine. Yet why did she keep feeling so useless?

AWWWOOOOOOOO

Alice's thoughts ground to a halt upon hearing the distant howl. A chill ran down her spine. Her body was abruptly alive, adrenaline rushing through her.

Everyone else had similarly tensed up. Those that were still conscious exchanged panicked looks amongst each other. "That... I don't want to know what that was."

"Wolves?"

"We don't need more monsters."

"We need the men to protect us!" Ms. Dodson spoke with a shrill cry.

The declaration brought Alice to attention, the adrenaline and tension brought her to her feet like a coiled spring being released. She turned to the others, her mind rushed. "Mr. Gabriel had said something about the gasoline," she spoke up, loud and clear. Years of practice helped her voice to be carried out through the bus. "Maybe we can use it."

"Do we have an alternative?" Someone spoke from outside the vehicle.

"Better be quick."

The people began to move on their own, almost in a panic, and Alice could barely keep up. She was a spectator as she watched the students and parents that could still move rushing towards the outside of the vehicle to prepare for what might be showing up soon. They used phones to illuminate the way, brilliant glimmers that turned the clearing floor into a dance of shadows and light.

Alice's thoughts turned away from the small crowd of people working on opening up the gas tank and towards the surrounding forest. The sound hadn't been too far away. How much time would they have?

In the corner of her eye, she saw the corpses. Her gut tightened and she couldn't help but wonder whether this potential new threat was going to make more corpses.

A shout drew her attention back to the bus. One of the men had become drenched in gasoline as he'd stood in the wrong place when the cap had been opened. It was Victor, the fellow teacher, now entirely stinking of gasoline.

Everyone rushed in to stop the flow before it could empty itself out, the man rushing away from everyone else and standing in the middle of the clearing, coughing loudly and trying to dry off.

"No one start any fire!" a voice called out.

The stench of gasoline lingered in the air.

Alice realized she welcomed the smell. Her nose had become numb to the stale air and blood inside the bus.

Alice's eyes turned towards the gathered crowd as they did the best they could to soak rags with the flammable liquid.

Inside her mind, she could hear the pressure within the boiler climbing further up, a faint wheeze warning of its imminent fracture.

Chapter 019 [Alice]

Alice sat inside the totaled vehicle and looked outside into the row of torches that had been lit up as soon as they'd detected the first signs of movement. The stench of gasoline permeated the inside of the bus and mingled with the stale air. It was light enough it only tickled at her nose.

Outside, shadows moved in the night, shuffling between the trees. She'd counted at least a dozen or so. She could hear hushed whispers and soft barks from the gloom of the woods, not even the moon shining down on the forest floor. Perhaps there was more to be seen, but to Alice, the darkness became harder to peer through once the flames had been lit up.

A handful of men held improvised torches high, sticks with gasoline soaked rags at the end that flickered in slow flames. They stood between the shadows and the bus. A facade of strength, Alice knew most of them would limp if they dared move from where they were. One had his arm wrapped in cloth since he'd badly hurt his wrist. The only one not present in the lineup had been Victor. The teacher had been drenched in gasoline, the stench clinging to him even after he'd changed clothes and done his best to dry off.

Inside the bus was Alice, the other women, as well as those too hurt to be able to stand outside. They were all looking into the forest and seeing the light that flickered from the shadows, glimmers reflected in the eyes of the monsters. There were growls, barks, and a howl. But the creatures did not approach, keeping themselves in the darkness and well away. Most appeared more focused on the corpses that were at the very edge of the clearing.

Someone shrieked when one shadow took a body and dragged it out of the light and into the blackness. The growling grew in intensity. A whine followed. The men tightened, sharing glances and raising their torches higher, moving to make sure and place themselves between the creatures and the bus, holding their torches toward the monsters.

For a moment, Alice spotted one of them. It was like the feline, a woman, but not quite. The monster's eyes were wild. Fur partially coated her back and arms, as if they were a werewolf of sorts that had failed mid way, its face still remarkably human. It resembled a human only in form, but definitely not in nature or thought. A savage edge was apparent in its gaze, a wild hunger that burned within.

How many were there? She wasn't sure. A dozen? More? Less?

If these creatures were of comparable strength to the cat, then there was little doubt the monsters would take them head on and win if they so chose to go for it. They could only hope to scare them off. The fire certainly was the thing all the monsters were focused on, never taking their eyes away from the torches, sometimes barking at them. But never stepping into the clearing.

The monsters were reaching for the corpses and dragging some of them off into the shadows. It was slow. A handful of the canine creatures, the larger ones, remained near the bodies but did not touch them. Instead, they were focused on the torches and those wielding them.

They could cut the tension with a knife.

Alice huddled next to May and two others, silently praying to whoever would be willing to hear her. Her eyes closed, the woman squirming slightly and turning away from the glare of the torches.

Her breath caught in her throat as she heard something.

Tapping, and the soft crunch of glass.

Her eyes snapped open to look through the wall of seats out into the darkness on the opposite side of the bus. She gasped as she saw a creature quietly peeking through the holes the seats left when blocking the window.

For a fraction of a second, the teacher could only peer into those curious wide eyes that looked through the holes in the windows. For a fraction of a second, she'd thought the being to be human. But it was not so. There were

two black canine ears atop her head, her face was caked in dirt, there was dried blood in her hands.

Alice had not been the only one to see the creature. Next to the teacher, May let out a blood-curdling scream.

It snapped her into action. "There's one behind us!" Alice shouted from inside.

"Do not move!" Came the shout from outside. "We move from where we are and they'll jump us. Julian..."

Alice could only feel her eyes widening at such a proclamation. She turned from the men with torches and the intruder that was circling behind the bus and approaching the door where Victor stood, the only defense between them and the monsters.

An image flashed through her mind, the feline standing tall and powerful inside the bus, her claws tearing through the one who'd tried to attack her in defense of the others. The splatters of blood still coated the wall.

A cold chilling panic gripped Alice's throat, her eyes looking at her fellow teacher as he'd frozen in place, looking at the canine that was slowly approaching. His face was pale, his eyes wide. What could they do? If they fought, they'd die. WHAT COULD THEY DO!?

Alice began to stand up, stopping as a clawed hand clutched at her arm. She turned to see the shadowy face of Ms. Dodson as she slowly shook her head. "If you draw its attention, we are next," she said with a hiss. "Do not get us killed."

She turned to look at the bus entrance. From where she was, Alice saw Julian just barely outside and using himself to block the door. To her right and at the other side of the improvised barricade, she could make out the shadow of the creature. Alice's hands tightened in the first piece of metal she could find, yanking her arm away from Ms. Dodson's cold grip.

A growl rumbled through the night air. Victor flinched.

And for a split second, she could see it clear as day. That little moment of weakness all the monster would need to decide to attack.

No, NO!

Alice's hand swung towards the vehicle's wall with everything she had. The resounding CLANG struck her ears with a piercing sound. Her hands shuddered from the impact, she almost dropped the piece of scrap.

"AAAAAHHHHH!" she roared, letting out a bellow as she swung again, hitting the frame hard enough that the metal rang all around her, deafening in its intensity.

Her action caused Victor to startle, but it had saved his life, the monster had yelped and jumped away, covering her ears and whining. Alice did not deter however, she swung again. CLANG the sound exploded, her lungs emptied, she drew a sharp breath, peering out of the bus and into the eyes of the hastily retreating monster. CLANG she swung again, her lungs burst with a roar, her arms shook. CLANG metal against metal, the beast was vanishing between the trees.

And suddenly, the lone scream turned into a cacophony of noise. Two others followed in the shouts, bashing their hands against the bus' frame. It was loud, very loud. In seconds, several more joined. Perhaps it was the fear, or the nerves, or that there was just the barest ray of hope. Maybe it was the pressure that had been bubbling and weighing down and threatening to crush them.

As one, yet with no rhyme or rhythm, they let out a racket of shrieking roars.

Alice swung again against the bus as hard as her arms would let her. Her fingers hurt and her throat felt like it was burning. Her own voice drowned it all out, but it didn't stop her heart hammering against the roof of her mouth. But it gave her strength. She stomped her shoes against the floor, and she screamed louder, swinging again.

Again and again and again.

Until her hands were bloodied, dropping the piece of scrap, until her throat was so hoarse it hurt. Alice collapsed to her knees, tears streaked down her cheeks as she took the world around her once more.

The others had stopped, slowing down. There were no signs of the monsters, there were no signs of them having been hurt. The fires had burnt out, the dim light came from several phones. All eyes were on her, the psychology teacher only barely able to awkwardly shift on the floor. Her breath was short, body drenched in sweat, she couldn't summon enough strength to do much else.

"Here."

The voice came from Victor, a lukewarm bottle of water offered and brought to quell her parched throat. It might as well have been ambrosia, Alice drank deep.

"Are they gone?" she asked, drying her cheeks from the tears that had ran their course. Somehow, she found the strength to stand, moving to step outside.

"They are," the man said with a slight nod.

Through the artificially lit darkness, Alice's eyes fell onto the remaining corpses that sat at the edge of the clearing, still untouched. How many had been dragged away? Her lips pursed as a heavyweight fell upon her heart.

"We should give them proper rest," she said with a half-whispered breath.

"It's going to be tough to dig deep." A harrowed weight lingered from his words.

The psychology teacher shook her head. "No." There was a strange clarity to her thoughts, perhaps brought about from the adrenaline. "If we bury them, it could still attract more monsters."

"Then we should burn them." Victor spoke with a soft nod. "And cover the remains."

If there was a complaint to be had, none spoke it.

It would be a long night for everyone.

Chapter 020 [Mark]

Mark Dodson walked next to his limping brother, Barry, and behind the rest of the group. The surrounding forest had grown dark, it was hard to see where they were going. Even with their mobile phones, Barry had some trouble navigating the labyrinthine layout of roots that made it all but impossible to take so much as a careless step without stumbling. And stumbling Barry did plenty.

"How long until we make camp?"

AWWWOOOOOOOO

Everyone stopped dead on their tracks, sharing concerned looks with one another.

"That... was far away," Veronica spoke.

"I don't think any of us want to stay put and find out exactly how far away that was. We move," Daniel said. The man scowled at Barry as he said this, but didn't add further commentary.

"We're half blind." Veronica twirled her phone in her hand. "We don't have infinite charge either."

"And?"

That was as far an answer he would give. Daniel turned to continue forward. The others mostly shrugging and following along. That left Mark only able to glare at the back of the older man's head. A part of him wished he could just cause the growing bald spot to spontaneously burst into flames through anger alone.

No fire emerged, so it left him venting his frustration by lending a shoulder for Barry to lean on. "Asshole," came the angry hiss. Their trek through the

roots was a nightmare, their movements were being constantly slowed down with the tricky terrain.

"I'll light the way, should make walking easier." Veronica pulled out her phone as she spoke, illuminating the forest floor ahead of them.

It was unfortunate that the light had been focused mostly ahead of Mark's steps. The younger Dodson brother mis-stepped and fell with a gasp. He'd almost managed to drag Mark down with him, though had let go before it could happen.

And no sooner had he begun attempting to stand up, Barry let out a shriek.

The sound drew attention from the others. They turned towards what had startled Barry. With the added illumination from Veronica's phone, they looked upon a half cracked skull laying next to where the younger Dodson had fallen. It was shattered and old, covered in dirt and worn out. It appeared human in both size and shape.

"Fuck me." Mark grabbed his younger brother's hand, helping him to stand up.

"This must really be some sort of hell," Daniel commented ahead, a dull whisper.

"If this is hell, I must have missed the fire pits." Veronica approached the broken skull, stomping on it into tiny shards under her boot. "We've seen the things that live here. We saw the cat kill a bat. Of course there's going to be skeletons around. Grow up."

The others looked at her with looks that barely hid glares. She just snorted and rolled her eyes and continued walking, prompting the rest to keep moving.

"You're... not scared?" Barry asked, looking down to avoid tripping again.

"Animals kill animals all the time, it's stupid to pretend things are evil just because they can or will kill you." She pointed over her shoulder in the

direction of the howls. "They need food, you are food. It's that simple."

"Seems pretty damn evil to me." Mark frowned. "Nothing respectful about eating the dead."

Veronica chuckled. "You vegan?"

"Fuck no. But animals are animals, people are people."

"Not to them you're not. Meat is meat, and at the end of the day we're all animals." The young woman's voice carried a lilt to it. "The cat ate her fill and played with that teacher. Whatever howled, I'm sure it'll be the same thing. If they're not protecting their territory or their young, they have little reason to hunt when they have their stomachs full." Her lips turned upwards into a smirk. "The question is who gets to jump first down the gullet."

"Not it!" Barry proclaimed, trying to hide his nervousness.

"Cats are assholes, pretty sure they like toying with their food and killing for fun."

"Domestic cats are the assholes that kill stuff for fun." She replied.

"I'm allergic to cats."

"I know." Mark glared at Barry. The bespectacled young man squirmed slightly as he hopped over from one root to the next, taking a second of assistance to regain his balance.

The younger Dodson brother could only grimace and nod, thanking the light Veronica was shining to help him navigate between the trees. Despite Barry's best efforts, it was easy to see he was regretting having come over with the others. The expression was a rather well-known one to Mark.

The older Dodson brother pretended not to notice, the sigh restrained. What was there to do? It wasn't like the people at the bus had any hope of fighting whatever had howled back there. There was a frustrated, roiling feeling within his gut. "We won't be able to keep this up for much longer."

"It's probably nine."

"What?"

"Nine in the evening," Barry said, nodding a little. "I synced my watch when I saw the sun at its zenith. It's probably around nine." A slight smile appeared as he spoke, his gaze flickering at Veronica, but not staying for longer than half a heartbeat. There was a moment of hesitation as he adjusted his glasses. "I'm also fairly sure we're far from civilization."

"No shit, Sherlock." Veronica rolled her eyes, snorting loudly.

"What do you mean?" Mark ignored her.

"Well, last night... the night sky was beautiful." Barry let out a slight chuckle as he said this, pointing upwards. "The trees blocked a lot, but I'm sure I spotted the Airuga constellation better than ever. There's definitely no light contamination, not like in the city. Not even close. Pretty sure it's clearer than even out in the rural areas."

"Anything actually useful?"

The younger Dodson flinched as Veronica spoke. The proclamation caused Barry to go silent, lowering his head as he quietly shook his head, keeping silent. They said little else as they continued moving through the looming dark spires of wood.

Bit by bit they progressed through the obstacle course that were the ancient roots. Everyone kept their gazes attentive even when all that greeted them was the darkness of the forest. There was something haunting about the cool stale air that lingered around them. They moved like ants, the trees large enough their imagination played tricks on them. Giant shadows that moved through the darkness, shapes and sounds that were alive but vanished as soon as they paid closed attention.

They would keep moving forward until Daniel stumbled down one of the thicker roots.

"We'll set up camp, and a watch rotation," Daniel spoke without so much as acknowledging the trio were there, instead focusing on the others.

Mark helped his younger brother down. "Gonna smoke," he said, dropping his backpack and pulling out one cigarette from his pocket. His eyes lingered on Daniel but turned away. He'd been about to take a step but paused, glanced at the backpack again, and yanked it over his shoulder before anyone could notice he'd put it down first.

He noticed a second later Veronica's eyes had been upon him, following him to the edge of the small area. She kept quiet, pulling out her own choice of breathable poison.

"Why did you bring your brother?" Her words came out calm, almost soothing. It was a stark contrast to the sharpness she'd wielded since leaving the bus.

"Better here than with the hag."

A cocky look was thrown his way. "You really think so?"

"You don't know her as well as I do." Mark looked over his shoulder at his sibling, watching the younger brother pull out some water to drink, appearing oblivious of everyone else. "Here's safer."

The woman leaned into him, dark brown orbs looking at him from between the strands of black silky hair falling at either side of her pale face. "Why do you figure?"

Mark snorted, rolling his eyes. "What do you figure draws the most attention from things that eat people?"

"More people?"

"Blood and corpses."

Veronica nodded solemnly at this proclamation, turning away and taking a deep drag from her cigarette. "I guess it was the right choice to follow along, then."

Chapter 021 [Mark]

It was rather hard for Mark to get some decent sleep. The issue wasn't the lack of a bed or the lack of a roof. The guard rotation hadn't bothered him that much either. No, what bothered him the most were the sounds. It'd been hard to notice at first, little creaks of wood and little noises here and there. And once, a distant shriek.

They were sounds that were heard only once, so faint one might have mistaken for the wind or something else. But Mark was sure one of them had been a scream. His imagination kept running wild with possibilities. Was there someone out there that'd been hunted down?

It grated on his nerves and it made his sleep restless.

It would be early morning when he jolted awake one last time. Mark looked around and found Veronica sleeping next to him, her back pressed against his flank.

It was early enough there were only the slightest hints of light touching the treetops; the air was cool but not cold, and the breeze brought with it the scent of pine and damp soil. Mark laid there on the ground, organizing his thoughts and summoning the strength to move. Veronica lay next to him, breathing with slow exhales. He couldn't quite make out her features in the gloom, but the warmth of her body brought a second consideration on whether he should stand up.

Pushing his thoughts away from her, the redhead worked up the energy to sit up. His gaze moved across the improvised camp. Most were sleeping, arranged across the ground in a haphazard distribution of bodies. Mark could only shake his head slightly. There'd been no fire nor shared meal last night, everyone had been all too nervous the flame might draw unwanted attention their way.

Mark's hand reached out for his backpack, pretending to open it to take out some food, his arm dug deep inside and through the stuffing of clothes he had added at the last second. He relaxed as soon as his fingers brushed against the metallic object at the bottom. A simple reassurance, he left it there. Instead, he pulled out a granola bar and wondered how much longer his supplies would last him. It didn't look like he'd be able to survive for long, they'd need to find some new sources of food.

Might as well keep an eye out from now on.

"Hm?" The sound came from Veronica, the young woman rubbing her eyes as she sat up, looking around. A coy smile reached her lips as she glanced at Mark. "Sleep well?"

He rolled his eyes in response, turning away and looking for his brother. "Barry?" The call out made him realize he couldn't see his younger sibling anywhere.

"He went ahead," Daniel grumbled from the spot he was keeping watch from. "Said it was for the best since we'd catch up soon, anyway."

And just like that he wasn't sleepy anymore. Jolting to his feet, Mark approached the taller, balder man, glaring. "You let him leave on his own? Into the forest?"

"I wasn't about to stop anyone wanting to do anything stupid."

The words made Mark scowl harder.

"He took some of my paint, fuck."

Veronica cursed, drawing everyone's attention. They turned back quickly to Daniel and Mark. The older of the two just shrugged his shoulders and made a motion with his head towards one of the trees ahead. There was a white arrow that had been left on the trunk, a sign of where Barry had gone.

"Suit yourself, we'll be heading out in half an hour tops." The words came with a careless shake of the head.

"Fucking fine." Mark growled and moved to shoulder his backpack, stopping to look at the young woman for a moment. Seated on the root, she was taking a bite out of an apple, grinning. He rolled his eyes in response. "You coming?"

"Sure."

Ignoring the derisive snort that came out of Daniel, they set out in pursuit of the white arrows. Mark kept growling inside, wishing he could've been awake when Barry had left. When had it been? How had he missed it? He could only guess he'd been too tired to notice.

"You sure we ought to go without the others?"

"Don't much care."

"If you say so." Veronica hopped over the fallen log, glancing at the painted white arrow that lay on the tree trunk they were walking towards. "He sure moves fast when no one else's around."

"Probably had a good head start." How long ago had it been? An hour? Two? More? They'd yet to even spot Barry. Unless the younger sibling suddenly recovered, that should mean at least half an hour.

"What do you figure we'll find, in the end?" Veronica spoke up, her eyes not really following Mark or the arrows but lingering in their surroundings.

"In the end?"

"You know, there's all these monsters. What kind of civilization would be out there?"

"Fuck if I know. If it's safe, I'll be happy about it."

The proclamation made Veronica shrug somewhat. "I think we should start hiding our scent." She proclaimed.

"Bit late for that."

"I was thinking about last night and those howls. They might decide to move after us after they've cleaned up whatever's left of the bus." There was a bored edge to her tone, as if she were talking about the weather. "Probably best we were ready to ditch everyone if things come down to it."

"Not without Barry."

The declaration came with a solid grunt of effort while maneuvering onto a root. His words made Veronica take a moment and frown, but she kept quiet, matching his pace, moving through the forest with greater ease. She almost made it look easy. They progressed one bothersome root at a time, following the white paint. Mark noted the number of white arrows were becoming sparser and spread apart at greater intervals.

Their silence did not last long. Within the span of an hour they'd spotted Barry. The younger Dodson was caught painting another arrow on the bark, not hearing their approach as he advanced. His steps were slow and methodical, the limp still there, but the young man clearly pushing himself to keep the pace.

"Hey!" Mark called out.

Barry turned, nodded at them, eyes lingering on Veronica for a moment before he turned to keep moving forward, a bit more slowly now.

"What the fuck were you thinking?" Mark proclaimed as soon as he'd reached his younger brother.

Barry shook his head. "Going alone, figured the howls spooked whatever else might be out here. We need to cover the distance, anyway." A little pause. "Also, there are hogs out here."

"What?"

"Hogs, spotted one this morning, it ran off." Barry was slightly short of breath, coming to a halt to recover.

"Good to know, I guess. Next time don't go on your own, you moron." Mark slapped the back of his brother's head. "God damn it, you're supposed to be the smart one."

A bitter laugh escaped him as he adjusted his glasses, turning away. "Let's just move."

The tone surprised Mark. A frown followed. "Something wrong?"

Barry sighed. "No, nothing." He turned to move again.

"I'll want my paint back."

Veronica reached out and snatched the can out of the young man's hand before he could react. It only earned her a surprised look out of Barry.

"Whatever, the others must have started walking by now." Mark shook his head, gesturing the way ahead. "Let's keep moving, they will catch up soon."

Chapter 022 [Mark]

Mark grunted as he climbed his way onto the fallen branch. It was only really a branch in the sense that it was connected to a tree-trunk, but the piece of wood was large enough it could've easily fit a small bus within it. Barry and Veronica took a slight detour instead. With a little exertion, he managed to reach the top. And from there, he took the chance to look around with his new vantage point.

There was only forest and gloom in every direction, but he didn't expect to discover much more than when he'd been at ground level. After all, his primary purpose had been to make himself more visible to the group that was catching up. His eyes met Daniel's firmly, the smirk meant precisely to irk the older, greasy man. Little sense to waste the effort if he wasn't at least going to get some enjoyment out of it.

It was especially worth it to see the sour look on Daniel's round face- particularly when two of the others following him had similar expressions of annoyance. Mark let out a quiet little chuckle as he hopped off at the other side of the branch, grunting but regaining his balance fast. "They're almost here."

"Took them long enough," Veronica said with a smirk. "Shame we couldn't keep the pace."

The jab found its spot at Barry with few obstacles to be found. The young redhead flinched and turned the other way. His hand rubbed his right leg for a moment as he limped, his expression soured considerably.

"Well, we should-"

AWOOOOOOOOOOOO

"Fuck me," Mark growled, looking back over his shoulder fast. "That was definitely not over at the bus."

"They... this is weird." Veronica scowled. "They shouldn't be moving around at this hour."

"What?"

"It's broad daylight. They were hunting until late last night." She made a gesture in the direction the sound had come from. "If they're hunting again so soon, they must have slept... what? Four hours? Animals don't do that right after a kill."

"These are monsters, remember?" Mark rolled his eyes. He was starting to feel anxious now. That howl was closer than it'd been last night.

The young woman scowled, turning and looking at Daniel as he'd made his way around the tree. The older man's irritation had moved towards concern and fear, only the barest hint of disgust as he glanced at Barry. "We need to move and fast."

"Yeah, we're fucked if we don't." Mark had to nod in agreement. "Help me with Barry-"

"We can't."

Two words. Everyone became quiet, slowing down as they glanced from Daniel to Mark, and back again. The younger of the two furrowed his brows. Next to him, his younger sibling flinched and lowered his head, hands tightening as the fear rose inside his chest. "He's right, if you're going to run away from-"

"Shut the fuck up." The older brother took a stride forward, meeting Daniel's gaze without hesitation. Both men squared their shoulders. The younger one met the gaze, but his focus flickered to Daniel's hands. Last thing he needed was getting sucker-punched. "You leave him behind and I'll hunt you down myself."

"You can stick with him. I'm not going to stop you," he snorted, shaking his head and taking a step back.

Mark's jaw tensed, hands balling into fists. Briefly, he considered whether it would be worth the time and effort to punch Daniel. The older man wasn't too out of shape and had the weight advantage. But of the two, Mark was the less winded one. He was sure he'd get in the first two punches in at least.

Before the plan could be made real, Veronica stepped forward. "They're not here yet. We don't know how fast they're moving. For all we know, they're targeting something else."

Her words brought hesitation. Daniel's scowl faltered, though not Mark's. "We can start moving, but we have to press hard, if he can't keep up..." Once more, his gaze flickered to Barry.

"If you so much as-

"I can do it." Barry's words broke the tension, the younger man shoving his way between the two and stepping past them. "Let's not waste time arguing." His hands tightened on the straps of his backpack as he limped forward.

Mark shot a glare at Daniel but kept quiet, following alongside his brother, offering a shoulder to lean on as he helped him keep the pace. Taking a look at Barry, it was clear there was little to be said. The younger brother was pushing himself and was definitely intent on keeping focused.

The others followed suit, quietly marching and keeping their gazes into the forest, especially behind them. Everyone continued looking in that direction every other minute, as if expecting a horde to emerge out of the shadows any second. They all appeared to have come to a quiet agreement to remain silent, ears sharp and attentive of any unexpected noises. If they were being pursued, they heard nothing for a good hour- only their own grunts and crunching steps.

And then...

AWOOOOOOOOOOOO

It was closer, definitely closer- still far away, but far less than the previous time. Louder and clearer. Threatening. Was that a couple of kilometers away?

More? The forest seemed to distort and change the sound. It was impossible to tell with certainty. And they didn't plan to stick around to find out. They shared gazes with one another. Mark glared at Daniel, but the man did not look back. He started walking faster. The others followed at the new pace.

Mark knew Barry wasn't going to be able to catch up.

"Hey!" the older Dodson called out, a loud shout. "Bald-ass, I'm talking to you!"

Daniel slowed, stopping for only a moment. His expression was cold, and his eyes lowered, looking not at Mark's face but his chest. There was hesitation there, almost shame. "If you want to survive, you know what you have to do."

Without another word, he turned around. The others followed.

"You forgot something!" Veronica ran towards Daniel, the older man pausing in confusion as she shoved her backpack into his hands. "Since you're leaving us to die, you might as well take the loot."

The man's face hardened, this time truly looking at them with remorse. But it meant nothing. He tightened his expression into a scowl and nodded. Without another word, he turned around and began to walk.

Veronica hurried back to Mark and Barry. Her expression was unreadable. "We need to move, now."

"Agreed," Mark commented grimly, shifting his weight and turning in a new direction. If the primary group was heading West, they were moving North-West. As good a bet as any, so long as it got them away from the howls.

Veronica nodded. She caught up and offered a shoulder to help Barry move faster through the complicated terrain.

"Let's hope the wolves don't choose to go after us," Barry spoke under his breath. He grimaced with every other step, but he was going harder than before. There was a rhythm, accompanied by heavy, quick breaths.

The oppressive forest weighed down on them.

And the quiet feeling that they wouldn't be able to keep helping Barry move forever.

"Don't worry," Veronica replied, a smirk blossoming from her lips. "That part's taken care of."

"What do you mean?"

As Barry asked, his brother could not help but find the amusement that appeared on the young woman's face concerning. She didn't answer, keeping a stern face as she walked faster.

"It's not a guarantee." Her words came in a hushed tone, yet the smile didn't leave her lips. "So we better move fast anyway, just to be sure."

"Sure of what?"

Veronica shook her head.

"Sure of what?" Barry's voice lowered as he repeated the question.

"That the wolves will follow the others and not us."

Chapter 023 [Mark]

"And how sure are you that they'll pursue them and not us?" Mark's distrust oozed out of his words.

Veronica returned the scowl with one of her own. "I'm not absolutely sure, so we have to keep moving, anyway."

He could tell she was trying to avoid answering the question. He could see it on her lips, and in the way she turned the other way and almost shrugged the younger sibling off. But he had little intention of putting more pressure into it—not when their own life was on the line.

Barry had been just as attentive, but he had other ideas.

"What happened to make you think that?"

"Nothing, you fuckwit. We either move or we die. Are you going to waste more time playing twenty questions?"

Her words knocked any desire to continue straight out of Barry. Mark glanced at his sibling and could only shake his head and sigh. The last thing they needed right now was to start up some argument that would bring nothing. They needed to focus on moving forward. The terrain was complicated enough already. The task itself was arduous, especially while needing to help the younger man along the way.

It did not take long before their breaths came ragged and strained. The trio of college students was not in the most stellar of physical conditions, and it showed. Every passing minute was a growing pressure against their legs and backs, and a growing looming sense of approaching danger.

Mark could only curse inwardly once he began to notice how their progress was slowing down. His ears strained, trying to push out the sound of his breath. Had there been more howls? Were there signs of approaching pursuit? If anything, the more terrifying aspect was that, were he to see them

coming, then it was a sign that things were as close to doomed as they could be.

Doubly so if these monsters moved at any speed, similar to what the spider or the cat had shown. They couldn't afford to be spotted at all. It would be over then and there.

But he would not give up. He pushed onwards, forcing himself to take more of the load as Veronica had stopped trying. Barry himself seemed just as determined to not be a burden. But his efforts were far less successful than his brother's. The younger sibling's limp had worsened with the strain. His expression was all too easy to read- more so as he began using his left leg less and less.

Soon he was nearly hopping his way forward.

"How far... do you figure... we've reached?" Barry panted.

"Not enough if they chase our trail."

The proclamation made the trio grimace. "Can we even outrun them?"

"Doubt it." As Mark spoke the words, the other two's expressions soured. "We'll only tire ourselves out if we continue like this. We can't really make too much progress. If they hunt us, we're fucked."

"Not unless we leave him behind as bait to buy us some time." Veronica's laugh was bitter. It made the younger Dodson wince. She rolled her eyes as she let go of him, leaning away to catch a breath. "It's just a joke." She shrugged dismissively. "So long as they have a track to follow, we're fucked, bait or not. We don't even know where we could find help or someplace safe."

"I mean, I..."

"I'm not leaving my brother behind."

"Like I said, just a little laugh." She shook her head. "Look, it's good and all that we take a minute to think about where we stand because, frankly, I don't

see a way out. They go after us, we become dog food. At least them following the other group will buy us time."

"How are you sure they'll go after them?" Barry brought up the subject without missing a beat, meeting her gaze firmly.

The young woman took a moment, sighing. "Whatever, might as well tell. My paint, it stained my backpack I gave them, it's probably going to leak," she said. "That shit stinks of solvent. Hopefully the wolves follow the easier trail and not ours."

"You-!"

"Do we have any better choices?"

"You chose to get them killed!" Barry winced as he leaned forward towards her. "That's..."

Mark crossed his arms and nodded. "It was the right thing for her to do."

"Wha-?"

"It was us or them, Barry, they'd made that clear when they opted to ditch you. I choose us."

"He's right, there's no point in pussyfooting about it. If we're going to die and they opt to throw us at the wolves, we might as well return the favor." Veronica moved to stand next to Mark as she spoke, leaned ever so slightly into him, placing a hand on her hip.

"But- I-"

With a grimace, Barry's lips closed. The young man quietened as he looked down at the ground. It was clear he was trying to come up with a rebuttal to their statement, and could not think of one. The sight of it made Mark remember the many times they'd gotten into trouble over the years. He wondered when his younger brother had become this... weak.

"Look, we can't waste time, let's take a five minute break and keep moving." Leaning against the tree, he pulled out his water bottle and took several long gulps. He'd have offered some to Barry if he wasn't certain his sibling would have refused it.

But mostly, his thoughts kept tossing and turning as they focused on the problem at hand.

Even without Barry's limp, they weren't fast enough to escape. A pack of wolves was likely to track them down eventually, anyway. Were they so relentless they'd attempt it, even if it took them a good while to catch up to Daniel's group? That appeared to be their only hope. A hope that they covered sufficient distance from Daniel and his group to avoid being next on the target list. But it was an ugly prospect that relied too much on chance. What would they do afterwards? No signs of life other than their own and the monsters thus far. No safety that could protect them.

The questions remained, tumbling within his head, unspoken.

Glancing at Veronica, it was clear she was also tired, but taking it much more easily than the others. She looked distraught, more than exhausted, with crossed arms and a long, unfocused look on her face as she peered into the woods. It was an easy guess that she was moving through much the same conundrums Mark was.

Did she have an answer? Mark might not trust her with a knife, but she'd certainly proved to be a cunning bitch.

Yet Barry was the only one who appeared less worried about the concept of a potential tomorrow. He chewed his lower lip as he stared at the dirt under his shoes. There was something else on his face, the beginnings of a smile? No one except his older brother would have been able to recognize that look—a slight twitch of the lips and crossing of arms.

"You have an idea."

Slowly, the younger sibling nodded, his eyes remaining on the ground for five more seconds, his finger tracing lines against the dirt. "I think I do."

Chapter 024 [Rick]

To Rick, morning came with the warmth and the pressure of his body trapped within a tight hug from behind. There was little about it that was uncomfortable, even if perhaps it was too tight. Still, it had felt somewhat out of place, and he certainly did not want to overstay his welcome. So it was time to attempt escape. His squirming made Monica's arms apply just a bit more effort and pull him closer against her, nuzzling against the back of his head.

Unable to move from the spot, the young teacher resigned himself to being the little spoon for the time being. A part of him pointed out how this might have been more enjoyable under different circumstances, but he muted it. As he lay there, he took the chance to consider the day ahead.

From the looks of it, the sun would rise soon. The sky was turning a light orange, but the treetops had yet to be graced by the morning rays. There were no clouds up above, and the wind was almost... calm, gentle, maybe even soothing. The shadows still played and spread between the wooden behemoths, but something was different about it. Distant.

Perhaps it had to do with the feline murder machine that was hugging him with her powerful arms. It was almost reassuring, almost as if she were protecting him. But it didn't quite feel that way to him. Still, her heat wasn't unpleasant, especially not when he could easily tell the contours of her figure moulding themselves against his body. For a moment, he became lost in memory of a warm bed, a cool afternoon, and a little voice asking him to cook breakfast. It caused a twinge of bitterness in his gut. He quickly pushed the thought away with a sigh.

This was not the right place to think of such things. There were more important things to worry about.

Rick squirmed and tried to turn around, hopeful he'd be able to repeat the trick from the day prior and have her relax her grasp. He was without luck,

however, as Monica let out a scoff and pulled him in closer still. It was hard to determine whether she was also awake, but it made him feel like he'd been made into a pillow instead of an active participant.

So he waited some more. The spot he was in gave him little to see other than the forest ahead. But he did catch the sound of light snoring within the cave behind them. If nothing else, at least there wasn't a stench of blood. That was good news. As far as he was concerned, it seemed the others had made it through the night just fine.

By the time Monica slackened her grip, the first rays of sunlight were approaching the edge of the cave. Rick managed to squirm his way out of her embrace and stood up, dusting himself off and noting how the lazy feline stared up at him with a pout.

Ignoring the stare, he checked up on the others, peeking into the cave. Mr. Gabriel had not moved from the spot he'd sat down on the night prior. The older man's head bobbed quietly as he snored. Behind him, the mouse woman had remained curled up into a ball, albeit pressed against the old man. She was breathing slowly as well, appearing just as dormant and calm.

It was the other two who'd drawn Rick's attention instead. Kat lay on her side, her back pressed against Tomas' chest and hips. The both of them were in a similar position to the one Monica and Rick had shared a moment ago. They could have almost managed to fool others into thinking they were asleep.

Almost.

It was easy to see the intense red colour on Tomas' cheeks, and the way neither of them were really breathing as slowly as one would expect when asleep. Kat's eyes were closed, but her fingers twirled against the palm of Tomas' hands, her hips bumping against his own in a teasing grind.

"Time to wake up," Rick pretended he'd not seen anything, making both sophomores twitch and scuttle away from one another. They were still wearing clothes, so it seemed Kat had been teasing the poor fellow student. The young teacher could only smirk. "Sleep well?"

She distinctly avoided eye-contact. "Oh, it's morning, like, totally had not noticed. Really good sleep, yup, very good sleep, right Tommy?"

"Tommy?" The teacher raised an eyebrow.

"Erm, yes, I slept well too, slept all night long." The young man adjusted his glasses, taking them off and cleaning them with his shirt.

With a long, bored expression, Rick shook his head. "You haven't slept at all, huh?"

"Nooope, really slept, all the way." Kat let out a little giggle, patting down her lap, and pretending to dust herself.

"Sure, whatever, we need to get going."

"I-I agree, the sooner the better. Should we try to look for water?"

Tomas' question gave Rick some pause. He tapped his chin in consideration. "We have enough for a day, that's... not ideal."

The student coughed, taking a glance at Kat and turning away quickly. "I meant... where there's water, there's civilization," he pointed out. "If there's a river somewhere, it might be a good lead to find help."

"If nothing else, it would help us stop worrying about water... I think it'd be a good idea. Got clues on how to find one?"

"Ask the cat?" Kat paused, then giggled. "Not me, the less cute one," she said, turning to the cave and approaching her sleeping grandfather.

"Might as well try, I guess." The woman had sat up, taking in the first morning rays as she eyed him with an arched eyebrow. The young teacher had to stop himself as his eyes became caught upon her figure as she basked in the morning rays.

Naked as the day she'd been born, Monica sat with her legs crossed, leaning back as she exposed her chest to the warmth of sunshine. Rick's eyes traversed up her fur covered calves and halted at her knees where the fur

ended and her honey colored thighs began. Those powerful thighs moved all the way to the tuft of white hair that covered her mound. The teacher's throat parched up as his gaze continued upwards. The valley of her stomach was taut and flat, her skin marred solely by some dirt and the plentiful presence of scars that made her body a road-map of countless battles. Further up, she had the mountains of tender flesh on display, generous and firm, both capped by pink nipples.

It took a second to tear his gaze away and continue upwards. He reached up her clavicles, her sturdy neck, and stopped in the almond-shaped eyes. He noticed that the look she was giving him was no longer frustrated. She was purring, lips turned upwards in a grin as she licked them in hunger.

He felt rooted in place. If not for Kat's laughter, he might have become entirely unable to move.

"Someone's interested."

Rick could only cough loudly and pretend Mr. Gabriel hadn't caught him staring. The old man only smirked as Kat covered her mouth to hide the giggling.

"Let's... get this show on the road." Pushing his mind to think on Tomas' proposal, he took a deep breath and stepped towards the purring feline, pulling out the bottle that was nearest to being completely empty out of his backpack. Monica's eyes were quite attentive as he presented the item.

"Water."

With the spoken word, he took a big swig, gulping, and offered the bottle at her.

Monica's amusement and coy smirk had changed to curiosity, eyes widening as she leaned forward to look at it more closely. "Mwawe," she declared, snatching the bottle from his hands and looking at it from various angles. Her gaze became intent upon the way the water appeared to reflect and refract the incoming sunlight.

"Water."

Rick used a finger to tilt it, causing it to spill over a little. It made her flinch and shake her head. Monica frowned at the bottle, this time tilting it more slowly, trying to control it carefully. Except this time, she missed her aim, and the water splashed her face in full.

There were some amused giggles from inside the cave. Monica didn't mind, though, lapping up the water as it ran down her face.

"Water." Letting her finish emptying the container as she drank it, Rick came closer, kneeling down in front of her. "Water." He cupped his hands, mimicking the gesture of drinking from a pool. "Do you know where there's water?"

"Mwawe."

Monica tossed the empty bottle to the side, standing up.

Her hand grasped his own, and she began to walk out of the cavern. He followed, mostly unable to stop, even if he wanted. "Erm...?"

"She seems set on taking you somewhere," Tomas muttered.

"Good luck."

"We'll wait for you here, you'll go faster without me," Mr. Gabriel commented, his expression serious. "We'll see if we can find something edible."

"Prep to head out as soon as we get back." Rick commented, turning to follow the feline.

Chapter 025 [Rick]

Rick found it rather rough to follow Monica, especially when she was clearly pushing for a harder pace than yesterday. But that much he would've been able to handle. What was pushing him to move faster was how the feline appeared to enjoy all too much, leaping up into the foliage and vanishing. Only to reappear further ahead, settled on a branch or on a root, waiting for him. And each time she would puff up her cheeks at him, yowling and running off again, apparently wishing for him to pursue.

Despite the playfulness of her vanishing act, her constant disappearance had Rick on edge. The surrounding forest looked no less dangerous than the day prior. His head was on a swivel, turning towards each new sound and disturbance that prickled his patience and frayed his nerves. The woods were dim, and the noises plenty. Which of them came from Monica, and which from something else he did not know. And that was daunting, every dark recess feeling as if having an unseen pair of eyes watching him, waiting...

"Chuwoc."

With a half-suppressed shriek, Rick jumped to the side, falling flat. Looking over, where he'd been standing at a second ago, he saw Monica.

She sported a very broad amused smirk; she'd not made a sound, and he hadn't even felt her presence until her voice had spoken right next to his ear. The woman let out a chuckle, leaning down and meeting his gaze with a wide grin. "Chuwoc."

He glowered at her, shaking his head as he reached into the backpack. It took him a moment before he found the requested treat. "Chocolate," he proclaimed with a sigh, breaking a piece and offering it for her to grab.

Monica leaned down, looking at it with narrowed eyes, lips turning into a frown. Leaning away, she shook her head, one hand shoving Rick's offer

back at him. "Chuwoc." She pointed at him with her clawed, furry finger. At his face specifically.

"For... me?" Rick could only frown, moving the piece closer, raising a doubtful eyebrow at her. Seeing her eagerly lean closer, smile widening as she watched him with wide attentive eyes, he broke a piece and put it into his mouth.

That was when she leaned in, lowering to her hands and knees as her face was abruptly oh so terribly close to his own. Her eyes were wide, a deep blue sea of attention split only by obsidian slitted irises that were dilating. Her breath washed against him. It made him gag a little. What caught him by surprise was when she leaned over that remaining inch and tasted his lips with a tentative flick of her tongue. "Chuwoc," her voice came out in a whisper, her paws on the ground near his hips as she waited with a slight smile.

A heartbeat of silence. Rick remembered what he'd done to draw her attention before leaving the bus and suddenly found himself holding back the desire to curse. He'd been an idiot, and he'd swallowed the candy out of surprise of her getting so close. "Sure... chocolate..." Turning his head, he began to look for a new piece.

The attentive patience turned to a slight pout. The growl she let out made every nerve ending on Rick's body freeze in place. Her paw moved and with a shove, pinned him down. The human could only grunt and do his very best not to move as her whole body shook like an earthquake from the rumbling sound. Her fangs gleamed sharply in the morning gloom, and her pupils narrowed into slits. Her fingers flexed, claws sinking into his chest and prickling him. "Chuwoc."

With a wince, Rick nodded vigorously, reaching for the treat. His heart beat like a drum, hammering against her paw as his shaking hand moved the chocolate towards his lips. Making sure to show Monica how this one he wasn't going to swallow, he left it in his mouth, watching intently.

She leaned closer, parting her lips and licking Rick's again. He suppressed the trembling and extended his sugar coated tongue, reciprocating the gesture.

With her mouth slathered in the sweet confection, the rumbling softened, turning into a purr. She closed her eyes as she tasted her lips slowly, savoring the sweetness.

The purring grew louder. The pressure with which she pressed down on him eased and she lifted her hand, moving it so she'd have a claw at either side of his head. She leaned down and licked his lips again. This time, her tongue pushed forward and into his mouth, seeking to steal every bit of flavor from him. It was aggressive, persistent, hot and messy. She pressed her whole body against him as she purred again, the vibrations rattling his bones.

With a gasp, Monica pulled back. Her cheeks were flushed and her lips fixed on a smile. "Chuwoc," she said, pointing at the chocolate that remained in his hand.

Rick couldn't do much more than lie still, his mind too startled to process what just happened. But Monica was impatient, her hand pulling his and moving it closer to his mouth. The last piece of chocolate. There might have been a consideration over needing to think this through, but it was clear the feline would not tolerate any wait. Thus, the new piece went into his mouth.

The feline lunged back in, surer of herself this time, pinning him to the ground with her mouth while her breasts squeezed against his chest. Her tongue moved like an angry serpent, licking and wrestling with his own tongue as she kept the purr. The sound made Rick's body shudder, and it did not escape him how she kept pushing her lips against his even after she'd taken all the sweet there was to be had from his mouth. She did not move from where she was, pushing further. The woman was assaulting his sense of taste, pressing more of herself against him as she did.

Rick moved tentative hands down her body, resting them on her hips, something she neither minded nor cared about. Instead, she ground herself against him. Only her breasts kept her from getting as close as she appeared to want to. Her body was becoming hot, and Rick squeezed the contour of her firm ass, digging his fingers into the toned flesh.

Only then did she snap away. She looked at him, breathing hard, face blushing, and pupils dilated as her tail swished in an erratic rhythm of

different emotions. Monica frowned, looking over her shoulder at her behind where his hands were currently at.

Slowly, she turned back to look at him. Rick had pulled his hands back and held both up in a sign of surrender.

"Wrwick."

She forced the word through a grimace, her tongue appearing to not quite familiar with the sound. Pulling back from him, she stood up and turned in what appeared to be the same direction they'd been heading to earlier. Without so much as another sound, she jumped up into the trees, vanishing within the foliage with barely a trace left behind.

Flustered and breathing hard, Rick was left unable to understand what had just happened, or why, for that matter. A part of him spoke of how he should probably be far more scared than he currently felt. Perhaps the galloping heartbeat was a sign of that. But the fluster that was running through him spoke otherwise.

And as he spotted Monica landing twenty odd meters away, something else rumbled within his chest. She looked over her shoulder and down to her ass, groping it slowly before turning to look his way once more. There was a slight frown and a blush.

She was flustered. Maybe more so than even he was. The noise within him became louder.

Chapter 026 [Rick]

The kiss had ignited something for Rick, and the grope had changed something for Monica. This much was clear.

The human wasn't able to help but stare at the feline as she kept guiding his way through the forest. Dim lights from stray rays of sunlight lit the forest floor in curtains of brilliance that split the gloom. It made for sharp contrasts, their presence small corridors of illumination through which he and she would pass. The Amazonian woman would sway slowly, always ahead, but never entirely out of sight. Her hips would swing with the rhythm of her steps, her tail falling in an arch, accelerating, moving faster and then turning upwards on the other side, adding a flick whenever she turned over her shoulder to study him with a lingering grin.

Rick's narrowed eyes would flicker and meet her own before she'd continue on her way. Sometimes her ear would twitch at a sound only she could hear and she would rush out, vanishing between the trees. Sometimes she came back just as quickly, and other times Rick was almost sure he could feel her gaze on him as he kept walking. She did not sneak up on him this time, though, always landing on the forest floor somewhere within his line of sight. She was light on her feet. No matter what height she fell from, she seemed to touch the ground as if weighing no more than a feather.

When their eyes met, hers would linger, and she would frown before her gaze would pull away.

The human's feelings were tumultuous. His thoughts danced to how incredibly dangerous this whole thing ought to be. His hand caressed the scratch she'd left in his chest mere minutes ago. It still stung at the rhythm of his accelerating heartbeat. She had pierced through the cloth like it'd not even been there. Could he dare to guess at what she was thinking? There was little doubt that if his assumptions were incorrect, he would die. That tiny room for uncertainty and severe consequence gnawed at him.

No. Rick shook his head. No, he told himself, this was wrong. He was trying to survive in an alien place with strange creatures. The last thing he should be speculating about should be this, of all things. And yet his gaze would linger on the curves of her body as she moved, the sway of hips, the curve of her toned ass, and the back and forth of the tail. Her skin was a honeyed, a sticky trap that had ensnared his thoughts.

Monica, if that was the name she'd agree to call herself, was something entirely different from everything Rick had ever encountered. Alluring and deadly all within the same breath.

Something pierced through the silence of the forest. It had taken a moment for Rick to pull his attention away from Monica's body to catch onto it, but it soon became apparent what it was. Running water. The feline hadn't reacted to this noise, no doubt having heard it long before he had, but once Rick's steps sped up, her ear flickered and she turned to glance at him.

Instantly, she sped up, matching his pace rather than waiting. A yowl escaped her lips.

For a heartbeat, she allowed him to almost catch up. And no sooner was he within a handful of meters than she bolted forward, letting out a mewling sound and looking over her shoulder. The smile faltered as she saw he'd not changed his pace.

Monica slowed down again, this time staring at him more intently, almost a frown. She waited until he nearly caught up, until he was just a meter away, just a little leap away. Then she bolted, an explosive burst of air following her as she covered ten meters in less than a second. She let out a happy yowl as she twisted to look at him again. The smile died the moment after the human felt slightly startled at the expression that showed... she was pouting?

She turned around to face him in full. Hands on her hips, she waited for him to catch up. Since she'd placed herself in his way, Rick could only stop and look up at her frown. "What?"

With a loud snort, she leaned forward, grasped his hand, pulled at it, and placed it on her hip. The breath caught in his throat at the feel of the smooth

skin under his palm, and the next moment she took off, having moved in another burst of speed to run away from him. His palm was left grasping open air, and it left the human looking down at his palm with a slight sense of awe. He did not move a single step as he watched her halt and look at him with a deeper pout than before. His hand was warm. Her skin had been so soft... the sense of trepidation grew.

Now that there was little doubt of the intent, his mind raced.

Gritting his teeth, he took a deep breath and stepped forth, the next a little faster. This time he jogged towards her. It made her ears perk as she turned away from him, and as Rick sped up, he heard her purring, watching her tense as he did. Her tail whipped in anticipation. He sprinted, the distance narrowing fast. And as he'd almost caught her, she leaped forward with at least twice his speed.

A yowl escaped her as she wriggled her hips at him. He accelerated as best he could through the roots and uneven ground. Sometimes he faltered, and others he'd nearly trip, but he was moving towards as close as he could into a full sprint.

Monica was teasing him. She would slow down for him to almost catch up, yet she kept speeding up before he could. She was too fast for him to really reach her. A few times she exploded forward as if she had invisible wings, covering at least ten meters in a single bound; others she moved just barely fast enough for him to think he almost had a chance. Rick's blood rushed through him, thick with adrenaline, the beat of a drum that hammered against his lungs. Twice he had nearly reached her, just close enough his hand tingled with the warmth of her skin.

She laughed, a sound close to a yowl that carried a deep rumble with it, looking at him with wide eyes and a loose smile.

And just as he'd been about to reach her yet again, she stopped dead in her tracks. Rick gasped. She stepped aside, and he could not react fast enough. Her foot got in the way just enough to trip him up.

Rather than hit the ground, he fell head first into a shallow stream. The jolt was hard and wet. Chilly water splashed all over. The human had blunted the impact with his forearms as best he could, but the chill would not be denied. A startled yelp left him, not from the pain against his wrists, but from the water. It was freezing cold, and it had drenched him from head to toe, running all around him. Rick needed a second to catch his bearings enough for him to sit up and realize he had found the water.

It was barely a little more than half a meter deep. The ache in his forearms was manageable, but the blow to his ego had been devastating. He looked upon the feline that was rolling on the ground in a fit of giggles and laughter.

"So that's how it's going to be, eh?" He raised an eyebrow at her. Cupping his hands together, he threw the water her way.

Monica shrieked and jumped away as the water hit all over her face and chest. Her eyes were full of betrayal and narrowed eyebrows as she almost glared at him. Rick opted to remain comfortably seated at the center of the small stream, being the one laughing instead, splashing some more in her direction and chuckling as she hissed at him once.

"Maybe I should get a spray bottle or something," he spoke with a laugh.

A laugh that ended the moment she'd pounced straight into the stream, right towards him.

Slippery rocks kept him from being able to move in time. She soared across the air and landed on top. Her claws did not press down on him but rather splashed against the water all around him, the water almost drowning him.

As he gulped in a lungful of air, she kissed him in full.

Chapter 027 [Rick][

Rick could only spare a moment to ponder what he was doing. He was drenched, sitting on a small freezing stream with the water reaching all the way to his gut, stranded in an unknown land, and being kissed by a naked monster woman that was part Amazonian warrior, part wild temptress, and part feline. Her skin was smooth and hot under his fingers as he reached for her hips, the fur on her paws holding him closer against him. It was a battle of contrasts. Her skin was soft, but her muscles were hard, her hands were covered in soft snowy fur, but her thighs and torso were supple silken honeyed skin.

The human's mind tumbled its way through the sensations and thoughts.

She was not an experienced kisser, but she was aggressively eager. She mashed her lips against his own as her tongue invaded his mouth and tasted everything he could offer and more. It was wet, cool, and slightly rough, unlike anything he had encountered before. A small mental note told him she needed a mint.

Rick couldn't much attempt to push into her mouth, even here she pushed against his own. When he did manage to slip past, she bit down, softly, just enough to snatch the tip.

He sputtered for breath as soon as Monica pulled back, releasing his tongue. They stared at each other. Her eyes were pools of liquid sapphires swirling with desire, her face flushed as her tanned skin took a redder tone on her cheeks. Slowly, she gulped for air, licking her lips as she panted. Those very lips curled up in a curve of amusement. This was something new, exotic. Her furred hands moved from his shoulders and grasped at his shirt.

He saw how her eyes lingered over him, pupils dilating slowly.

With an ease that made Rick feel like a rag doll, she lifted him by his clothes, pulling him closer to the side and out of the stream of water. His body

shivered from the cold, but there was a growing heat inside of him as he found himself unable to turn away from her. Especially when she clenched her fist and tore at his shirt slowly, breaking with such an ease Rick suspected he had worn tissue paper for clothes that morning.

The woman was the first to break eye-contact, gaze trailing downwards and looking at him with a slightly furrowed brow. She leaned closer, frowning further as she focused on his chest more closely. Tossing aside the piece of cloth she'd ripped off, her hand moved to grope at his chest hair.

"Hey!" Rick winced as she'd tugged a bit of it off.

The feline peered at the hair she'd pinched between her claws, inhaling it, and then turning to him, tilting her head as she leaned back down, breathing him in with a deep inhale. She licked the spot she'd pinched and pausing as the human couldn't help but squirm at the sensation. A rumbling sound emerged from her core, a purr but deeper. The first image that came to Rick's mind was of tumbling rocks down a hill, or chainsaws being left on idle. Blue-green eyes locked onto him as she moved down, straddling his hips while continuing to lick his chest.

She took his hands and placed them on her legs. The soft wet skin was alluring to the touch, and he could tell there were powerful muscles right underneath. It was as if he were gripping iron through a satin cloth. His fingers drifted to her knees, where the fur began, and then trailed their way back up to tease at the inside of her thighs. Monica's eyes glowed with approval. Her mouth moved its way up and reached for Rick's neck. Every muscle on his back tensed when her claws lightly scraped his shoulders. Her tongue licked its way down to the base, her paws moving to pin him against the dirt.

The man's hands remained on her thighs, stroking them slowly, moving their way up and back. His touch traversed around her hips, gripping her ass. Firm yet more pliable than the rest of her, she tensed. With a flicker of her gaze, she continued back to his lip, a kiss before she returned to his neck, licking his collarbone. Pausing for a moment, one claw reached for Rick's right hand and drew it to a different part of her body.

His eyes widened when she placed his hand between her thighs. His fingers brushed against the bush of hair through it, parting it and touching the tender skin of her loins. The purring became louder, moving through his body and making him vibrate all over. The woman leaned closer, crushing her pliable breasts against him. Monica's back arched and she pulled her groin further into his probing fingers. Her fangs nipped at his shoulder, making him wince. Taking a deep breath to calm his rumbling heart, he stroked slowly, teasing her sex in gentle caresses. She was soaked from the splash-down in the stream.

Monica moaned when he parted her folds and pushed a digit into her. It surprised Rick a little how hot and wet she was; he'd never been with someone who'd gotten this turned on this fast. Or maybe she'd considered the running a warm-up? Whatever else he was thinking about, he drove it out of his mind as she nipped at him again.

She was claiming his attention in full, and he wasn't about to refuse.

Hotness was against his right palm, softness against the left. He moved the latter upwards, tickling her ribs and making her purr relent for a moment with a slight shudder. And as he found his way further up her body, moving to her breast, the vibrating sound came back fully. Rick swallowed when he cupped the hefty orb of pillowy flesh. It was large, heavy, and oh so soft. He squeezed it tenderly, its weight pressing her hard nipple against his caress. He felt as if he were a teenager again. He was fumbling in his attempts to keep his attention split between the hotness between her thighs and the rich elastic sensation of her large tits on her chest. Hunger welled within him as he ached for more than just touching and wished he could touch her all over at the same time.

From where he lay he could only see the top of her head, two white furred triangular ears that stood straight and were aimed at him, nestled in a bed of off-white drenched hair. Chuckling, he blew air at them, amused at how they flicked, doubly so at the look of annoyance she shot him. He winced when she bit his shoulder, lightly and playfully, but clearly in retaliation. It still stung, even if it didn't draw blood.

Her hips ground against his finger, and he marveled at how flexible she seemed to be despite the incredible power she wielded. Though she was soft, there was hardness combined with the athletic tightness of her body. Her stomach was taut and flat. He could have counted her abs had he cared to try. Her chest was heavy and ripe, firm and elastic. With his palm gently squeezing against it, she licked harder against the nape of his neck. Her tail whipped back and forth, raised high in the air.

She wanted more, and so did he. His hand groped more firmly, the other plunging a second digit into her inviting pussy.

The cat yowled and shuddered, the heat redoubled within less than a heartbeat, her legs spread wide and her claws reached downwards. Monica only needed to flick her wrists, and his belt was shredded. Another flick, and his pants were rendered entirely unusable. She stopped her kissing as she meticulously and carefully tore at the clothes, revealing more and more of his body.

Breaking away from his touch, she shifted her position further down, straddling his thigh. Her eyes took in his mostly naked form. Her fur covered hands retracted the claws. Soft pads touched their way down his chest. And just as she'd been about to reach his hips, she stopped. Blinking twice, she peered at his erection, tipping her head and frowning.

"Mrow?" She tilted her head in the other direction, staring at it further, lips pursing in apparent confusion.

"Erm..."

Heat crept up Rick's neck and cheeks as she leaned closer, looking at his dick and poking it with her finger, claw fortunately retracted. It made him shudder a little, and that caused her to look up at his face and then down at it. A smirk appeared. She poked it again, and the human shivered again.

"Mrick." She cooed, pressing the pad against his tip and slowly trailing her way down the underside of his cock, causing it to throb. He tried to reach down to stop her, but her other hand swatted his fumbling attempts away. She

licked her finger, ears perking a little, a thoughtful look crossing her face as she moved to straddle his hips once more.

Biting her lower lip with a shiver, she pressed her pussy against the length of his shaft, pushing it to be sandwiched between his groin and her pussy. Rick squirmed and groaned. She purred louder and opened her thighs further. It was like being caressed by hot, wet embers. Fire played within his chest while she stroked him, her hands laying at either side of his head as she reclaimed his mouth in a sloppy, eager, burning kiss.

Rick's palms moved to her breasts. Unopposed, he groped them, teasing at her nipples as she moaned harder. Her grinding sped up for a heartbeat, moving in short, quick thrusts of friction that built her into a crescendo. Just as he began to feel being pushed closer to the edge, Monica yowled, shuddered, and stopped. Her head pulled back from his mouth and she gasped for air. The woman pulsed with heat, and her whole body trembled. A gush of fluids generously burst forth and coated his cock. Had she achieved orgasm already? If she had, she showed little signs of wanting to slow down. The grinding returned in full.

"You must be backed up," he said, increasing the effort of the massage and watching her squirm, blush, and hump him harder.

She shot him a smoldering look as she pulled away, sitting on his hips. Fangs flashed as she smiled invitingly, humping once and pausing, licking her lips in invitation. He grasped her pendulous breasts and tweaked her nipples. Her eyelids fluttered as she drew in a sharp breath.

Taking a supreme amount of effort, he stopped himself from thrusting his hips and rubbing against her eager sex, and instead moved down with one hand, changing the angle. She looked at this, and he pushed his hips forward. The new position allowed his cock to poke at her sex, the tip parting her lower lips. Monica blinked, clarity appearing to come to her as she glanced downwards. Only in time for a slight nudge in his hips to push further, her legs gave out, and she fell onto him, hip meeting hip as he pierced straight into her core.

A deep rumbling moan escaped her, half roar, half mewl. Monica tensed and gripped at his body. She drew in air sharply, looking down and meeting his gaze with a bewildered smile.

She attempted to move and flopped, needing another second to regain the strength in her legs. She pulled out just barely and collapsed back down, moaning into the kiss. He mirrored the sound. She was so impossibly tight and hot and wet. Rick grasped at her thighs and clenched, her insides gripped him like a vise. The sensation made his body move on its own, pulling back what little he could and humping back into her. She tightened further and squeezed.

Mewling, she broke from the kiss. Her mouth found his shoulder instead. The next half-thrust had her bite down as she wrapped him into a crushing hug. The purring intensified. He ignored the mild discomfort from her nipping at his skin. There was little that could stop either of them at that point, anyway. Sparks of sensation made him redouble his efforts to shove himself further into her. An animal roared within his chest, pushing its way through and out of his lips.

The light pain from the bite flared sparks. Her arms wrapping him into a tight hug, breasts mashed against his chest, and breathing ragged. The pace became a flurry, an unstoppable rhythm of barely cognizant mutual thrusts. Monica wailed and tightened as she came again. It nearly pushed Rick over. He could only grip her body against his own with white knuckles, muffling his scream into her shoulder, and then her claws dug into his back.

With a muffled cry, he was pushed past his limit. The sound of moans and the beat of his heart roared in his ears, the pain and pleasure mixing in a suffocating heat that burned out every other thought. Exhausted, he collapsed underneath her. She relaxed and slumped against him.

His fingers released the death-grip they'd been holding on her ass and moved to caress her back. Idly, he discovered the base of her tail and stroked it, prompting her to purr.

They both panted and breathed in hard, uneven gasps. Rick's everything hurt, especially his back and shoulder. Was he bleeding? He couldn't find the

brainpower to care right now. It was eclipsed by the weight of what they'd just done. Everything felt like it had just been knocked out of orbit. Thoughts muddled and swirled and pushed against one another in an effort to gain a foothold on his slippery mind.

"Well, that was something."

"Mrow."

She kissed him again.

It didn't seem she'd let him go so soon.

Chapter 028 [Rick]

With a profound sigh, Rick stepped into view of the cave.

"What the fuck happened to you?" Kat's voice rang out instantly. There was an edge of concern that instantly turned into amusement. "You got mauled?"

He stood shirtless. His pants and shoes were only half dry, and his shoulder and back had light scrapes that had at least stopped bleeding. His hair was wild and completely out of control, a mess of brown that put it looking closer to a ball of fur. The man's shoulders slumped, his focus anywhere else than the young woman. He did his best to avoid betraying any of the embarrassment currently burning through him. "Monica got a bit... physical."

"You're hurt." Tomas glanced from the pile of half burnt sticks that lay in front of him. "Did she break anything?"

"It's just scratches. I washed them over at the stream, so I hope they won't get infected."

Mr. Gabriel's voice broke the silence, a single harsh bark of laughter. The elderly man shook his head as his hand slowly patted the head of the mouse creature, monster, lady. She appeared to be asleep, not even reacting to the loud sound. Rick felt himself flush further.

"What? I don-..." Kat paused, looking between her grandfather and the teacher. Her eyes broadened. "Oh my god, you got snusnu'd!"

"That is..." Rick coughed. "We should get going. The stream is deep enough it could lead to a river. Did you have any luck with supplies?"

"Don't change the subject." She approached, nudging a bewildered Tomas aside. Her gaze up at Rick almost sparkled. She was grinning like a madwoman. "You fucked the cat. How was it? Did she pin you against a tree? Maybe she-"

"I think this conversation topic is entirely inappropriate, young lady." The scowl was impossible to sustain as she smugly kept staring up at him. There was just too much amusement on her face. The smirk was practically splitting her head in two. Rick could only cough and rub the back of his neck awkwardly. "It's really not important, we need to move."

With a scoff, she crossed her arms, throwing a pout his way. "Fine, be that way. Where's the lucky lady, anyway?"

"I think... she went out to hunt."

"Oh... oh!"

Faces tightened into grimaces, shared looks amongst the four.

"At least, like, she didn't come to eat us."

"You can't rely on luck," Mr. Gabriel commented gruffly. His fingers slowly stroked the short gray hair of the mouse woman. "It certainly feels like she was keeping this one alive in case she ever got hungry."

"Maybe more like a sadistic plaything." Tomas' face contorted and took a greener hue.

"Wait, do you think...?" Kat looked at the woman, then at Rick, and back again. "I mean..."

"I do not want to consider that prospective line of thought." The young teacher clapped his hands loudly. "Like I said, we need to move, we're burning hours, and I... wasted enough of them." His gaze turned to Tomas, and his voice faltered a little. "Also I... if you have a shirt you could lend me, I'd appreciate it. I only had a change of pants."

"Tearing clothes off, hot."

"Not a word, Catherine."

"Pfffff, you're no fun teach." She rolled her eyes, letting out a little grunt and turning to her backpack to pick it up. "There, I'm ready to explore some

more."

"How far is the river?"

"About half an hour." His gaze turned towards Mr. Gabriel. The old man had not moved from his spot. "What... are you doing?"

"I'm going to stay here."

"WHAT!?"

Mr. Gabriel leveled a severe glare at his granddaughter. "I will slow you down if I stick with you. I'm sure you could've covered the distance to this cave in half the time without me."

"Are you seriously...?"

"Dead serious, Catherine," he replied, his brows wrinkled deeply. "We are low on food and short on time. What are the outcomes if I stay here?"

"What?"

"Outcome one. You find help in time, and you come back to take me somewhere with a functioning toilet." The old man let out a grunt. "Option two, you don't find help. You come back. We try to figure something out." His fingers slowly brushed the hair of the creature sleeping against his lap. "Option three, you stumble onto something that will try to kill you." His lips pursed and his brow tightened. "If you have to run, you will have to slow down for my sake. And you won't cover as much ground as me sticking around. I am staying here,"

"Some monster could eat you."

"If any monster had the balls to show up this close to that cat's lair, this one would've been eaten already." His fingers kept slowly caressing the hair of the woman on his lap. "She's defenseless, yet she's alive."

Rick nodded solemnly, stepping forward. "What about Monica?"

"What about her? Either she follows you or she doesn't." With a gruff shake of his head, the old man kept his gaze firmly on Rick. "If she doesn't, you all die the instant you find anything like those other monsters. If she does, then I'm not in trouble."

"I don't like this." Kat moved into the cave, standing right in front of him. "I'm not leaving my grandpa alone in the wilds like this."

"You will have to."

"NO!" She stomped her foot, glaring.

"There is no other way."

"I refuse to believe that."

Mr. Gabriel met her gaze. The hard stone that was on his face softened ever so slightly. He took a deep breath and shook his head. His eyes glimmered with the barest sign of something other than cold, hard determination. The man reached out, offering a weathered hand. "Do you remember your grandmother, Matilde?"

"I... I remember she did great lemon pies." She took his hand, squeezing his fingers.

He chuckled softly, a slight smile. "That she did." With a deep breath, he tightened his grip on Kat's hand. "She loved making them for you very much." His lip straightened. "I want you to be safe, Catherine. This is the best way I can do that."

"I'm not going to let you kill yourself like this."

"Girl!" Mr. Gabriel's voice barked out. His face flattened, cold and unfriendly. "Never say those words. If I'd wanted to take my life, I've had well over a decade to make that choice!"

His tone had awakened the mouse; she'd let out a shrill squeak and sprinted deeper into the cave. She curled up, looking at the others with wide brown,

terrified eyes. He glanced at her and deflated, his shoulders slumped down. He let out a sigh as he turned to look at his granddaughter once more.

"I do not plan to die here. Get going, girl."

Kat's face contorted into a glare, hands tightened into fists. She almost seemed ready to shout or scream. Closing her eyes, she looked away. "Fine. Fine, fucking fine!" The young woman turned around, stomping her way out without another word. Tomas was quick to pursue.

Rick met Mr. Gabriel's eyes. The older man slowly shook his head.

Quietly, the young teacher reached into the backpack, pulling out the plastic bag that had his portion of food. Opening it up, he removed the pieces of candy and dropping the food and two water bottles.

That made the older male frown. "What are you doing?"

Rick gestured at the mouse that lay next to the wall of the cave. "She's going to need food too, and I doubt you won't share from yours." Rick sucked in a deep breath, glancing into the woods. Pointing. "The stream is in that direction. There are scratched trees around it, so it's likely still inside Monica's territory. Shouldn't be too hard to get there."

"Are you sure about this?"

"I'm a teacher." Rick chuckled with an awkward glance towards Kat and Tomas, watching the young man attempt to halt the woman as she kept stomping her way through the trees. His jaw tightened. "I'm not letting anyone else die on my watch."

Chapter 029 [Mark]

Mark moved alone, but with a purpose. His steps through the forest were accompanied by the crunch of dried twigs. He was moving at a light jog, his breathing a steady beat that matched the rhythm of his heart, if not the pace. His focus wasn't on his movements, but on trying to find something. Carefully, he slowed and looked around, peering at each tree he passed and those that came after. One by one he discarded them; none of them were what they were looking for.

There were several qualifying features to look out for, the main one being easy access to at least the first set of branches. So far, all trees had their bigger branches too far up.

The beep of his watch warned him this was as far as he went. He turned in the opposite direction with one last glance at the area, in case he'd missed anything. He couldn't help but growl inside at the frustration- there'd been no luck, it seemed. Returning to where he came from, the older Dodson brother kept his ears sharp. His pace was slower now to let him catch his breath. There was one sound he had to pay extreme attention to, one above all others that would signal their time was running out. They didn't have any to spare.

With the light that shone down from the midday sun, he could easily make out the path he'd taken. Though he was also aware how simple it would be to get lost. Keeping a close eye on that was the second priority. This forest could fuck with your sense of direction without even trying.

After a fifteen minute power-walk, he reached Barry.

The younger red-head moved with a stick for support. His pace was a troubled middle-ground between fast and pained lethargic. He almost jumped as he heard Mark approach, only calming down after a good, long look. "Any luck?"

"Nothing. Veronica?"

"Hasn't come back yet." He waved at the opposite side of the forest.
"Shouldn't take too long."

Nodding, the older sibling slowed down and kept the pace. He took a little gulp of water, and he used the hem of his shirt to dry the sweat on his forehead. "Here's hoping the plan works."

His expression soured considerably. "Here's hoping we don't need to test it."

"That's too hopeful even for you."

A slight, nervous laughter followed. Barry awkwardly turned his attention downwards while keeping the march forward. There was something to be said about the way he focused on the moss underfoot. The young man carefully reached into his pocket and pulled out a piece of breadcrumb, dropping it on to the forest floor. The act itself pained him, with what little food there was available. But he kept from showing anything other than the slightest tension on his lips.

Mark moved silently at his brother's side, his focus instead turned outwards and to the world around them.

"Hey, Mark?"

"Hm?"

"Do you think we... can trust Veronica?" Barry spoke, looking downwards with a frown.

"I think trust is a big word when we're focused on surviving."

The answer caused the younger of the two to raise his gaze and meet his brother's eyes. He stopped, looking at him with an unreadable expression. He gave a slight shake of the head.

"What?"

"No, it's... nothing," Barry muttered. "It's just the whole paint thing."

Mark nodded. "It was them or us. I just hope it's them."

Again, Barry did not answer, remaining quiet as he looked the other way. Mark didn't push; he knew the only thing that would come out of it would be an argument, or worse. Right now, they did not have the time, energy, or luxury for one. With a grunt, he shoved the idea aside and kept looking at the woods that surrounded them from every angle.

"I just think that-"

"Hey!" Veronica's voice rang out. Their attention snapped in her direction, watching the younger woman moving out from beside the tree.

Mark's eyes narrowed slightly. Had she been hearing them talk?

"I found something!" Her tone was oblivious. If she'd heard them, she didn't show it.

The proclamation brought a flutter of hope made its way through their chests. They changed course to head in the direction she'd come from.

"What is it?"

"A tree, you need to see it."

"What?"

She waved at them and turned around. "Just move, ok?"

That was a good enough reason as any to follow her. The forest was no less gloomy or threatening than it'd been so far in the new direction they'd taken, but they noticed there were signs of damage. Heavy damage.

Here and there, they could spot burn marks on the bark, torn earth, and even large branches that had fallen at some point or another. The damage wasn't fresh, but it definitely looked as if it'd been only a few months ago. There were gouged out parts in some of the trees, and the burns still had some charcoal sticking to the scars.

But it was when they saw one tree had toppled over that they had to stop and stare.

The behemoth was wide enough, the toppled trunk was more akin to a massive wall tens of times their height, and long enough, they couldn't see where it ended. It was as if someone had taken a pillar that reached all the way to the sky and knocked it down. The wood had cracked and was burnt in many areas. Mold had grown on the underside. The first signs of rot were visible on the bark. And yet, many of its branches stood taller on their own than many normal trees ever did back in their world.

There were only two words that came to mind when looking at it. "Holy shit."

"Look at the stump," Barry said, finger pointing at the base of the fallen wooden skyscraper.

The "stump" was two stories in height, at least. It was splintered and torn, a jagged row of fangs that pointed skyward. There were scorch-marks all over it. But what had caught everyone's attention had been the tree growing out of the center. It was no less than ten meters tall and sprouting out of the stump as if the ancient being had refused to die and was emerging anew.

"How long ago do you figure this thing got knocked over?"

"I don't... know, but..." The younger Dodson brother shook his head. "If the main trunk is only rotten to this point, it can't have been that long ago."

"Bullshit, that tree growing from the trunk must be at least twenty years old." Mark growled.

"Not to burst your botany excursion, but we came here for a reason?" Veronica rolled her eyes, ignoring them both and hurrying towards one of the thicker branches of the fallen tree. A branch that could serve as a ramp for them to go all the way and above the trunk. She pointed upwards. "I figure this qualifies for what we were looking for."

"Barry?"

"I... it might, yeah." He glanced at the rest of the tree. A nod followed. "Yes, I think it might be usable. We just need to be careful to find the right spot. Maybe we should start by-"

AWWWOOOOOOOO

All three of them shuddered. The sound echoed through the forest like the sound of a starter pistol.

"How... how far do you figure that was?"

"It's definitely closer than last time." Veronica's eyes narrowed. "Maybe the other group were useless, and the wolves followed us."

"Or maybe they're still going for the other group?" Barry muttered.

"Does it matter?" With a glare, Mark reached out to grab his brother's shirt and tug. "We need to get moving, you especially, we can't play with ifs."

"Worst-case scenario, they're coming right at us and we don't have the time."

"Which direction should we take?" Barry dropped another crumb of bread.

"Do you have a destination in mind?" The woman turned to the younger of the three with a look of frustration. There was a sharpness in those eyes.

"No?"

"Then the direction doesn't matter. Move fast or we're next on the menu."

Chapter 030 [Mark]

It was with labored breaths and hurried steps that Mark and the others ran as best they could given the uneven terrain. The midday light shone down on them through foliage and heavy branches, filtered through the gargantuan trees that surrounded them. The shadows left the forest floor in a light gloom that left their steps unsteady. Shadows played tricks in their desperate push forward.

"How long?" Barry panted, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a fistful of crumpled sandwich to drop on the ground.

"Three more minutes," Veronica intoned, glancing at her mobile phone as she kept the light jog. She was sure to keep her pace next to their own. "Are we sure this will work?"

"Do we have any better fucking alternatives besides fighting?" Mark growled. "Because I don't trust we can win in a fight."

The proclamation was harsh, but close to what they all had quietly thought. The look on the older sibling was enough to cut off any response. Not that there was much of a desire to turn this into an argument. Their breath was precious and they could not waste any of it.

Barry's phone dinged in alarm, the timer having run off and reached the limit.

The three stopped and pulled in heavy breaths. They needed a moment to glance around, recover their bearings, and calm themselves. The forest remained in its eerie darkness all around them. If not because of the sunlight that broke through from time to time, it would've been impossible to move this fast or at all.

Mark nodded. "Ok, time to change."

Letting go as his sibling dropped another clump of sandwich, Mark began to undress, using his shirt to dry his sweat. While the younger used the moment

to stop wheezing. Another handful of seconds and he also began to strip, his clothes becoming the rags with which he'd dry his sweat.

Mark was already done. He approached the nearest tree and shoved his clothes under the exposed roots. His pants would follow soon after.

"I hope this w-"

Barry's words came to a halt as his eyes turned to Veronica. The young woman had taken off her shirt, exposing her pale skin and black bra. The sight caused Barry's breath to get caught in his throat as every thought in his head ground to a standstill for a split second. He could only watch the liteness of her figure and bluster. And she noticed. Veronica's lips pursed, her brows furrowed. The young woman shot him a quiet icy glare. Barry whipped around to stare in the other direction instantly, cheeks flushed, while he struggled to pull out the change of clothes from the backpack.

"Don't forget the phone," Mark warned. He noticed the odd hurried look his brother had, and though the words to ask what was going on came to his lips, he stopped when he noticed Veronica's scowl. As she turned towards him, the glare fell down into a flat, humorless look.

Something had happened?

"An alarm every fifteen minutes," Barry's words interrupted the flow of thoughts. He fiddled with the phone and dropped it next to his bundle of sweaty clothes. "Let's go back, we don't have the time."

"Remember we have to trace our steps."

"I left bits of bread. If we don't see them, we're on the wrong track." Barry nodded hastily, pocketing the remainder of the meal he'd been reducing to crumbs.

"Are we really sure we should head back?" Veronica frowned, looking over her shoulder at the route they'd come from. "They could be closer than we thought."

"If they're fast enough, then we'll get killed, anyway." Leaning to help Barry, Mark moved.

She said nothing to that statement, though it was clear she had a thought or two to share about it. "I'll wait for you at the tree. If you hear me scream, then that means things are fucked." Without another word, she moved faster, increasing her distance from them.

Within only minutes, she was out of sight. The two of them were left on their own, eyes flickering at the shadows, ears strained and trying to ignore the sound of their hearts. Quick breaths turned the world into a rhythm of ins and outs, their throats parched and dry.

"You really think she moved ahead to give us a warning if the wolves got to the tree before us?"

"Fuck no." Mark shook his head. "But if things get ugly, I'll make sure to deal with them."

Barry let out a laugh. "You have a plan? Don't overwork yourself."

"I have something better," he chuckled, shaking his head. "But I'd rather save it for an emergency, but-"

AWWWOOOOOOOO

The sound was like a shudder down their spine. "That was closer."

"That was too fucking close. How much longer until we reach the tree at this pace?" They shared a look. Mark turned his attention downwards at Barry's ankle. "We need to run."

The younger brother paled, but nodded. "Get the shirts."

"What?"

"The shirts." He signaled at his backpack. "Had another spare, we're going to be drenched when we get there. We need to dry off and drop it on the trail."

"Fuck that, just run."

A shared nod, and then they pushed themselves harder. The younger redhead grimaced and limped in his half-run. The older one kept himself close and helped where he could. Both had their focus strained towards the way the howl had come from. Was that movement? Was that shadow a monster? It was made all the worse because they were almost heading in that exact direction.

They had to reach the fallen tree before the wolves did.

Mark weaved his steps through the roots, spotting the breadcrumbs his brother had dropped every handful of meters or so. They were easy to see, specks of white in a dark brown and green mossy background. Still, his focus kept bouncing from the ground and to the darkness on the horizon. How long had they been walking away from the tree? It felt like an eternity ago. His lungs burned.

A yelp made him turn around. Barry had stumbled. He didn't hesitate as helped him back up. "Move it dammit."

Barry complied wordlessly, returning to his half limping run. His face was contorted in agony as he ran, and he muffled cries as he clenched his jaw shut. "TREE!" he practically gasped the word out, hand stretched out and pointing at their destination. It was so close.

A flicker of light above the trunk drew their attention. Veronica was flashing her phone in their direction. They redoubled their efforts even as their lungs burned for air and their legs cried for rest. It took a minute that felt like forever before they got close enough to hear her as she pointed at one of the larger branches that touched the ground.

"Over there!"

Following her directions, they hurried along towards it. Mark ran his way up, only needing to weave his way through some of the smaller branches that remained on it. Even as tired as he was, he felt a sense of awe as he moved. This lone branch on the tree was thicker than any tree he'd seen before. It

was as if some playful God had taken it upon himself to make a tree big enough to stick smaller trees along its trunk.

"There are some thicker parts over there we can hide in." She pointed to the side. "It stinks of tree, it should help."

"Shirt!" Barry called out, stopping as he pulled out a piece of cloth, moving it to dry his face and neck as best he could. With heavy pained breaths, he tossed the damp piece and moved up the same path Mark took.

AWWWOOOOOOOO

Veronica's head snapped to the side. "Shit, they're here!" Her voice came out in a harsh glower, barely a whisper. Her arms moved to gesture at them to hurry. "Move!"

She turned towards the younger sibling as he moved up the branch. Her hand stretched out, offering support. Her cold black eyes met his own as he reached out to take her grasp. She looked over her shoulder at Mark. The older sibling too preoccupied dodging the branches on his way up to look back.

Veronica turned back to look at Barry, her lips parted ever so slightly into a sneer.

And with a shove, she sent him falling down.

Chapter 031 [Mark]

At the echo of a heavy thud, Mark turned around. What he found was Veronica's face. Her eyes were wide, her lips tight, and a finger hovered over them as she trembled. Her whole body tensed as she hurried to get into the thicker portion of the leaves. She joined him right behind the branch, using it for cover.

"He fell," she whispered under her breath.

Two words, enough to make Mark's blood turn to ice. His gaze swept the forest floor and found the bundle of red hair. Barry was lying flat on the ground, barely moving. The older brother would have jumped out of the hiding spot and attempted to make his way down, if not because Veronica reached out to clutch his arm. Silently, she gestured towards the opposite side of the fallen tree. It was there that Mark saw the monsters that had been pursuing them, moving with urgency.

Six in total. They were as much beast as the feline had been. These were not cats, however, but dogs. For five of them, the fur ran in a light brown pelt down their backs, their hands sporting small claws, and canine tails in a deathly focused stillness. Each of them had a wild look in their eyes, unfocused and uncaring, breathing and sniffing the air as they would move close to the ground and move on all fours from time to time. If not because of the blood drenching their chests and neck, one might have even considered the sight oddly appealing.

The sixth stood out as the leader. Her fur was obsidian, her figure lean and tall. She was at least two meters and with a physique too close to a body-builder, so much so it felt too out-of-place out here in the woods and not inside some illegal fighting ring somewhere. The black one kept moving ahead of the pack, only sniffing at the air from time to time. She didn't run or jog, and she didn't crouch. She stood tall, her eyes flickering around as she'd take long lungfuls and breathe in the scents, moving with determination.

It was clear she wasn't merely focused on the hunt, but on the pack's safety as well. There was a dangerous edge to those eyes that peered all around.

Mark's attention turned down to Barry. The younger man sat near the bottom of the downed tree while Mark and Veronica lay on top of the fallen behemoth. Their gazes met. The younger brother froze, eyes wide and pale face. His breaths were deep and uneven. The older one moved his lips silently. "MOVE." He mouthed the word out rather than speak it, pointing at the underside of the nearest tree. The earth below was dug out. There should be space for someone to hide there.

Anything was better than waiting out in the open where he could be instantly spotted.

With a trembling nod, Barry stumbled his way forward. His eyes flickered at his sibling and Veronica. "Mark, look." The woman pulled his attention away from his brother and towards the approaching pack.

The black-haired one was no longer there. She'd vanished.

For a heartbeat they both wondered where she'd gone, but the answer came to them before they could wander a guess. From the shadows atop the fallen tree, a dark silhouette emerged. The shadows had gained volume, and blackness covered it until it had grown in full. Only then did the shadows recede and in doing so revealed the dark canine as she walked up the fallen trunk's length.

In their direction, no less.

The two humans held their breaths and pulled behind the branch to stay out of sight as best they were able to. Veronica shrunk into a ball, and Mark reached into his backpack. Slowly, his grip inched its way down to make sure he didn't make so much as a sound. He very carefully gripped the piece of metal at the bottom and pulled it out just as slowly.

The sight of the revolver made Veronica's eyes widen like dinner plates. Her hands covered her mouth as he clicked the safety off quietly. The metallic

sound made them both flinch, ears sharpening and listening very carefully. There was a very real risk the monster might have heard of it.

But the only noise that could reach their ears was that of the pack circling around the tree in search of their prey. Barks and yips and hurried steps that were slowly gaining some distance.

And then, the sound of tree bark crunching. No more than a handful of meters away.

Mark aimed the pistol at the side of the branch he expected the beast to peek through. His grip tightened. In his mind's eye he could see the sequence of events unfold all too clearly. The monster would step into his line of sight, and his left hand would cock the gun just as he'd squeeze the trigger with the right one. It would take a fraction of a second, the creature wouldn't know what hit it.

And it would-

AWWWOOOOOOOO

The sound startled him.

Every muscle in Mark's body became rigid. His attention flickered down to the pack of monsters. They were running off down the path of breadcrumbs they'd made earlier, pausing only for a moment to turn around and glance at their leader. With a swishing sound, the blackness emerged out of the shadows of the trees down on the ground next to the pack. The black-haired figure walked towards the others with slow measured steps, her back turned away from the spot Mark and Veronica had been in.

The older Dodson sibling looked around, trying to find Barry. His gaze fell on the tree he had pointed to earlier, twenty odd meters away from danger. Under its roots, he spotted a hint of orange. The younger brother was curled up, grabbing fistfuls of dirt and rubbing them against himself slowly yet insistently. He was almost invisible to Mark at this distance. That was a good sign, if any, they were leaving.

A barking sound. The black-haired one pointed in the direction of the trail the humans had left behind. The monsters set off. The yipping and barking echoes in the woods dissipated along with them.

They let out a collective sigh of relief. Mark lowered the firearm. He relaxed his hands and removed his finger from the trigger, feeling his arms tremble. With an afterthought, he cocked the gun and looked down at it. He'd been stupid not to have it prepared earlier. His jaw tightened. That had been too close for comfort.

Chuckling nervously, he stood up, forcing deep breaths and trying to work the adrenaline out of his system as best he could. Mark turned his eyes towards Barry, seeing his brother remaining still. For a second he almost considered calling out to him, but the last thing he wanted was to taking the risk of drawing attention from the monsters.

And as he was about to step out of his hiding spot, he noticed his younger sibling had suddenly become very active. He flailed dirt covered arms from side to side, pointing at the tree. Mark frowned, already half-certain he ought to head down to his brother as soon as he could.

That was when he heard the growl.

Chapter 032 [Mark]

The growling sound made Mark's grip on the revolver become tense. His finger returned to the trigger instantly. The young human remained otherwise perfectly still, head turning to see the source. It was another of the black-furred monsters. It stood, half crouched, arms wide, her claws out. Her fur was black, much like the first one, but this one was slightly shorter, only marginally taller than Mark himself. Her gaze glowed red, fangs gleaming under the sunlight, and mouth twisted into a wicked snarl.

"Don't shoot," Veronica whispered under her breath, barely audible to the young man. "The others... will come."

Mark's eyes widened, and his jaw clenched. She was right, but would they be able to have the luxury to decide? He was too focused on the monster woman, looking at her from the corner of his eye and not facing her in full. Could he move without having her jump? Would she attack even if he didn't move? His finger against the trigger tensed. She was too close. He wouldn't be able to level the weapon before she reached him. A human would be able to get a good hit in before that. What would be the case to this monster?

It meant that, without a doubt, the moment she tried to move, Mark wouldn't have the time to react, let alone avoid it. Slowly, his left hand let go of the firearm. He remembered how the spider killed the other student almost instantly. He knew he'd die if she grabbed a hold of his head or neck. With a clenched fist, he spared a thought to Barry.

The moment he unloaded the gun, the rest of the pack would come.

They weren't able to outrun them. Veronica was right. It would be a death sentence. But what else could he do?

"Don't move." Veronica was moving, pulling herself to her feet and using the branch for cover to avoid being seen. There was something in her hands. A can? She was pale as she glanced at him, her breath a whisper. "Three..."

The monster's ears perked. Her eyes flickered at the large branch that was being used for cover. Her lips thinned as the growl grew deeper.

"Two..."

The creature took half a step to the left, lowering herself as her hackles raised, ready to jump.

"ONE!"

Mark didn't know what was about to happen, but he jumped back to duck behind the trunk. Veronica's hand reached around the trunk and aimed the spray-can, blindly unloading its contents on the canine.

The bark the monster let out was deafening, followed by a whine that became a screech. The dog-woman's face was now coated in a layer of white paint. She stumbled back, clutching at her eyes and nose. A second shriek came as she tripped and fell from the trunk. It was a full ten meter drop that ended with a solid thud. Mark couldn't believe his eyes as, apparently, the fall had not even fazed the monster. She continued rolling on the ground, clawing at her face, trying to remove the sting from the paint.

"That was too noisy." Mark gave her a look. "I thought you got rid of all the paint."

"What? And stay defenseless?" She shot him a dirty look. "Forget that. The bark was fucking loud. We need to go."

"Not without Barry."

"Fuck Barry, he's safe in that spot, it's us who are in danger!"

He looked down at the hole, at his younger brother curled up and covering his mouth tightly with both hands. The monster they'd dropped was only half a dozen meters away. And though she was clutching her face and writhing on the ground in agony, Mark guessed it would not take very long before she'd get up. She'd probably be very, very angry. It made him tighten his fist.

"They're fucking here!"

That was the only warning he needed. The older brother caught on the sound of barks. And they were growing closer fast. Mark cursed under his breath, glancing at Veronica and then back at Barry.

The younger sibling shook his head, trembling as he kept his mouth covered with his hands. The terror was clear in his eyes as he could only curl further into the hole under the roots in hope none of the monsters would find him.

"I-"

Mark's lungs failed to inhale. What should he do? What could he do? All his body left him able to do was clench the gun tighter. Despite the weapon in his grip, he felt powerless, the part of him screaming to run down there almost deafening out the other one that pointed at how fruitless it would be. He didn't notice the shadows shifting behind him, or the figure slowly emerging from them, eyes glowing red.

"Behind you!"

With Veronica's scream, Mark's body moved on automatic, jumping forward and feeling something cold run its way down his spine. He stumbled, falling down and turning, raising the gun and meeting the gaze of the bigger of the two black monsters. Her eyes simmered with anger as she stepped in his direction, ready to attack.

In a snap decision, he took aim and pulled the trigger.

BLAM

It was aimed true, directly at the center of the monster's chest. The sound was deafening in the forest's silence. It left Mark's ears ringing. He could almost see the bullet hitting her squarely in the center of her chest. The creature cried out, clutching her head and stumbling back a step. Veronica leaped out of her hiding spot and shoved her off before the monster could recover her balance. A cry followed as she fell down. The impact against the ground was solid. She became still on the ground below.

The pack had reached the clearing, stopping dead in its tracks as all five of them stared up at Mark and then down at the fallen pack leader. Their eyes turned to the other black one. She was coughing as she stood up, eyes red and white paint splattered all over her face.

The young man stood up on shaking legs.

His foot slipped on the trunk, and his world tumbled only for half a turn. He was going to fall.

"MARK!"

The cry came from amongst the roots under the tree down below, where Barry was staring with wide, panicked eyes.

Veronica moved to grab Mark's shirt. "I've got you!" Her grip was tenuous, but it was enough, barely enough. Mark had almost fallen over. With one hand gripping the revolver tightly and the other reaching out to grasp at her, he pulled himself back to a stable footing.

But his near fall was not what was on his mind. It was Barry.

In his cry, Barry had drawn the attention of the pack. The monsters had seen him, and three had turned to focus on him. The one with the white paint glared at Mark, snarling as her focus flickered towards her downed companion.

"Oh shit," Veronica's words rang in the air, heavy.

"This is bad."

"Mark." She pointed below. "She's not dead."

Both of them glanced downwards at the monster that had been shot in the chest and fallen ten meters to the ground. They could only gasp. The monster coughed, whining and shaking her head. And, with some effort, got up.

She was not dead.

She wasn't even bleeding.

Chapter 033 [Mark]

The monster was slowly getting on her feet. She coughed, pressing a hand against her chest right where Mark had shot her. It was as if he'd only given her a good wallop and not an actual shot to the chest from a revolver. The monster shook her head once, twice, and then stood on an unsteady footing. For a second, her ears flattened against her skull, and she gave another deep cough before she straightened her shoulders.

On one side, the pack was looking at her and up at Mark. On the other, he and Veronica were staring down at the creature in disbelief. "But..." the young man whispered, his grip on the gun tightening. Mark's mouth clenched shut tightly as the canine creature turned over her shoulder to look his way. Red eyes gleamed in the forest gloom. The snarl that followed made his blood chill.

Monster and human held each other's gaze for a long moment.

There was a bark that drew everyone's attention. Two of the smaller members of the pack were ripping out the roots that protected Barry. The younger sibling was shouting and kicking, trying his best to avoid being snatched. But even from up in the tree, Mark could tell it was only a matter of time.

A shriek followed as one of them grasped his leg and yanked. The young man was flung out of the hole in one swift move, as if he weighted no more than a sack of potatoes. Barry rolled across the dirt, crying out and clutching his bad ankle.

"Barry!" A shout, a scream. Mark raised the gun and took aim. The distance was at least fifteen meters. Would he be able to hit? What happened if he missed? He only had so many bullets. The monster might do that shadow thing right back up. Could she catch up instantly? Maybe he could scare her off?

He aligned the sights. Maybe a shot in the chest wouldn't be lethal, but what about if it was in the head?

BLAM

The nearest dog that had been digging into the roots cried out. Blood sprouted out of her thigh. She stumbled and clutched at her leg, crying out. The noise had been loud- loud enough to startle the whole pack.

BLAM BLAM

Two more shots. Both missed, but the monsters moving towards Barry scrambled off, trying to avoid getting hit. The others began barking at him, the sound a cacophony of noise that punctured into his ears. Mark narrowed his eyes, sprinting towards the branch that led down to the ground. "Barry, run!" He shouted.

BLAM

How many bullets did the revolver have left? The anger rushed through his head like a ringing bell. His blood was pumping as he saw them hesitate, looking at his approach with apprehension. Veronica called out to him. He didn't hear more than a muffled voice; he couldn't hear anything other than the ringing that drowned out all else.

BLAM

This one hit one of the smaller ones in the shoulder. With a scream, she stumbled, spinning around and running. Others followed. It only fueled Mark to move faster towards his brother, turning his aim at the one with the white mark on her face. But she was gone before he had the chance to pull the trigger.

It was as if the shadows had swallowed her whole.

The human hesitated, looking over his shoulder, behind him, above, and to the sides. Where was she going to emerge from? He couldn't see anything move or shift. Had she opted to run as well?

"Mark!"

The cry made him snap back to his brother. The larger black monster had reached Barry. With a yank, she pulled him into her grasp, placing him between herself and the armed human. The look in her eyes spoke it clearly. 'I dare you to shoot', a threat, the younger human being used as a shield. Mark felt his finger falter in the trigger. His grip was shaking. He wasn't sure he'd be able to avoid hitting his brother.

For a heartbeat, it almost seemed like it was a stalemate.

Until the shadows crept up their bodies, letting the monster sink into the ground, sucking them both into the darkness.

"NO!" Mark roared, rushing forward.

The spot the black monster had been in had nothing in it, just dirt and moss.

"Over there!"

Veronica's voice made him turn her way, seeing her finger pointed into the forest. He snapped his attention in its direction. Barry was slumped over the shoulder of the larger black-haired woman, thirty odd meters away. She was running, following the others into the woods. And she was running fast.

Mark instantly tried to run, to chase. For ten seconds he pushed himself to go as fast as he could.

But the monsters were faster, way faster.

He lost sight of them before he had even lost his breath.

A wordless scream left him. Heavy breaths followed. His hands clenched as he screamed louder.

Staring into the uncaring gloom of the forest, a tightness clung at Mark's chest, his legs shook and everything appeared to collapse around him. Mark couldn't look away from the darkness where he'd last seen his brother as he felt a punch of ice lance through his gut.

Slowly, his gaze turned to the gun. His fingers trembled, he pulled the revolver open. No bullets left. A second scream joined the first as he threw the firearm as far as he could. "FUCK!" Closed fists hit dirt. The pain helped him contain the red that was spreading across his vision.

"Mark." The voice was soft, soothing. He didn't stare at Veronica, keeping his eyes shut instead.

"Fuck," he said again.

"We need to move." Her hand gripped his shoulder, tightening as he punched the ground. "They might be back, we can't stay here."

"They took my brother."

"I saw." She knelt next to him, reaching down to grab his hand in her own and squeeze. "But we can't stay, or the next ones will be us."

"I..." He took in a long, shuddering breath. "I have to get him."

"How? We're slower, weaker. We don't have any more bullets either." She gently caressed the back of his hand. "And the black ones were bulletproof, it wouldn't matter, anyway."

"I don't..."

"Mark, look at me." Veronica reached down, caressing his cheek and nudging him to glance up, to meet her eyes, those black orbs that seemed to stare right through him with an extreme sharpness. "Barry wouldn't want you to die like this."

The name made his throat tighten, but he couldn't look away. He deflated with a defeated sigh, nodding. "I..."

"You can mourn him later. We have to move." She squeezed his shoulder. "Survive, it's the best thing we can do."

A second, much slower nod. The young man stood on shaking legs. He glanced around for a moment, spotting the discarded gun and moving to pick

it up. His grip tightened on it before he placed it into his pocket. His mind felt as if it were moving on automatic, there were too many things buzzing across his skull to be able to focus on any one of them.

A long gaze stared into the forest, in the direction they had taken Barry.

He was still half of a mind to follow.

"Here." Veronica gripped his arm, nudging him in a different direction. "Let's get going, we have to find somewhere safe to rest."

As she squeezed his hand, he clenched his jaw and nodded numbly.

Chapter 034 [Alice]

Alice noticed something moving up above as the day was nearing its end. At first she thought her eyes were playing tricks on her, because she was fairly sure she saw an angel. It'd been for only a brief instant, a shadow of something passing overhead. The creature's wings were a pristine white, and wide- at least three times its height. It was the silhouette of this creature that caused her to glance up at the sky and focus it in full.

Frowning, the young teacher covered her eyes from the glare of the sun and tried to confirm she hadn't just imagined such a thing. Had someone else seen it? A quick look around, none of the others were looking upwards, so she figured it'd been only her.

But the angel was gone, or perhaps not there at all. Alice briefly wondered how it would feel to fly across the sky.

But idle thoughts were as far as things as she could let them go. She couldn't bring herself to escape the current situation, no matter how hard she wished for it. Her eyes dropped back down to earth, to those that were arguing. The voices were loud, obnoxious, and aggressive. Many people were starting to feel the pangs of hunger from the rationing, their attempt to make their meals last longer.

Ricks' name was tossed around, and the psychology teacher's stomach tied into knots each time. There was a pit there, and an ache from something old that she thought long forgotten. Why was it coming back up now? Because of her concern? Alice ignored it, pushing herself to her feet. She marched her way into the bus, not wanting to hear another word from the spat the others were currently embroiled in.

Within the gloomy confines of the vehicle, the smell of blood and fear permeated the air. Alice only needed to take one glance to know things had not turned for the better. Those that had been worse off lay in the back, the teacher summoned her strength to approach. Or rather, she tried. Her

determination faltered when she was close enough. For most of the injured, the wounds were closed, but for some, the first signs of infection were starting to show. Irritated and bloated red skin, a slight fever. A part of Alice ran over the list of medical supplies they had on hand- rubbing alcohol and peroxide on the wound had done nothing, and they didn't have antibiotics.

They were going to be fully out soon, and what was left wasn't exactly usable for this situation.

With a worried sigh, Alice sat down next to the young comatose student named Ryan. His fever had gotten worse compared to the day prior. It put an open pit at the bottom of her stomach, a chasm of coldness. Alice's thumb slowly traced circles around the student's warm palm. A curse of despair was spoken under her breath. She couldn't even use a wet towel because the water they had left was too scarce. It would run out soon.

And that was a far bigger concern for everyone. You could live without food for several days, but without water? You'd be a goner and fast.

She exhaled and tried to relax her shoulders, to ignore the voices of concern in the back of her mind. The darkness of the bus was comforting compared to the shadows of the forest. Here she knew there was nothing hiding and waiting in every corner; here she didn't feel like there were dozens of eyes peering at her. Alice leaned back against the metallic wall. Idly, a memory bubbled forth of sitting down and drinking coffee at the library early in the morning.

It was a recent memory, no more than a month old. Alice had helped Beatrice shelf and organize the books that were returned after hours the day prior. Whatever they'd been talking about, Alice had felt herself in a better mood for it. It was why she did not mind when Arnold had called to mention he'd be late for dinner that day.

Her boyfriend's name caused Alice to sigh and shake her head. No, thinking about him right now wouldn't do her any good even if there was little she'd wish more than to get home and share a warm meal. The young teacher pushed herself to glimpse around once more in search of something. Something to help her take her mind off of this drudgery of waiting that was

eating at everyone's nerves. Nothing had changed, and no one had moved, and yet her focus fell on May, Charlie's younger sister. The young student kept her eyes closed, hugging her knees with her uninjured arm, and bobbing at the rhythm of some unheard music that was playing from her headphones.

Alice hated herself for it, but she couldn't really stay put and do nothing. She let go of Ryan's palm, tucking it at his side, and moved to sit next to the young woman with chestnut hair. "Hey." She gently placed a hand on May's knee to draw her attention. The only response was of the student raising her eyes slightly. There was a silence that followed, and with a brief nod, she lowered her gaze again.

The action made Alice grimace, but she pressed on. "Can I listen to the music? Please?"

Another moment of pause, of consideration.

Then, May let out a sullen nod. The girl reached out for one of her headphones and offered it. The teacher smiled a little and scooted closer, sitting next to her and placing the device into her ear. May hit play, and everything turned into noise.

Alice held back from wincing at the volume, adjusting the earphone instead so it would be not quite as close into her head. The music was something surprisingly cheery, having an upbeat that thrummed with a catchy rhythm. The words were unintelligible though. The teacher was fairly sure it wasn't English by any stretch, but the tune was a drum of electric flowers that just jolted their way up and down her spine. Without noticing, her head bobbed with the tempo. It reminded her of some sort of modernized folk song some place far away.

"What is this?" The question was only met with the younger woman showing the screen of her phone. "Adieu to this Lively Graveyard."

Ok, so maybe not as happy as she thought it was. The teacher did her best to hold back the grimace, keeping herself next to her student while they both shared the song. One became two, and then ten. None of them were in

English, but all equally carried a rhythm that made Alice want to just leave all her worries behind and dance.

That thought only made her groan inwardly, turning to look out of the bus. The others were in a similar situation, no doubt. She was fairly sure they were talking about heading out to brave the forest and see whether any food could be found. She didn't want to know who'd have to head out, and she didn't want to think of who wouldn't come back.

The tightness within her chest felt like a claw gripping at her heart. She closed her eyes, letting the beat of the music wash her off into an unthinking place. Her hand reached out and grasped May's. She squeezed in turn, and they both quietly allowed the melody to flow. It helped them ignore the hunger, thirst, and fear.

Neither of them heard the rumble of thunder in the distance.

Chapter 035 [Rick]

Rick's stomach growled in complaint as he walked uphill, following the stream. His brow furrowed, his gaze kept shifting between Tomas and Kat for a moment to confirm they hadn't noticed. He'd been fortunate, the duo were leading the way and keeping their eyes peeled for threats... and for Monica. The feline had vanished into the trees some time ago, again. Tightening his jaw, Rick drank some more water to help him forget the hunger. "How much further do you figure?"

Kat turned around, glancing at him with a slight frown. A question lingered on her lips as she looked at him, but dismissed it after a moment. "Shouldn't be much longer," she stated, looking skyward. "I think I can see over the top of some trees a bit."

Their new route had been a change in their desired destination. They'd initially wanted to follow the stream downwards, but had opted to go up hill, hoping to get a better look at the surrounding terrain. It had been a question Tomas had brought up regarding the others, the bus, and the people. If they saw that there were signs of civilization, they'd rush there to ask for help. And if there wasn't, then they'd have to adjust their plans again.

Because it would mean help would not come. So everyone would likely need to be moved towards Monica's territory, for the water if nothing else.

For the time being, Rick had found a firm stick that made walking easier. That helped, at least. His thoughts kept bouncing between his empty stomach and the plan ahead, his mind trying to figure out what might be up ahead.

"How much higher up do you figure this whole thing goes?"

"The mountain? It's hard to tell." Tomas rubbed his chin. Of the three, he was the least winded. He almost looked just about ready to start jogging his way up.

"We'll, like, find out when we get further up."

A shudder ran down Rick's spine. He whipped around on the spot, peering into the trees. Squinting, he stopped. Nothing moved, and nothing twitched- a light breeze blew through the forest, and wood creaked. Everything looked as it should, yet it didn't feel that way. It was as if he were being watched, a piercing sensation that punctured through his concentration, a little trickle of cold running down the back of his neck.

"Something wrong?"

"No, nothing." His grip tightened on the walking stick ever so slightly.

The young teacher suspected he'd just sensed Monica, but he couldn't be sure of it. The only certainty in his mind was that he could feel he was being watched right now, and it could very well be anything other than her. But he hoped it was her, the last thing he wanted or needed was to stumble into another monster.

That could get messy fast, better get moving.

The next step made Rick wince, reminding him of the light scratches on his back.

Would she push for more when she felt like it? Had it been some weird one-off? The whole context and questions kept nagging at him. But it was just another topic he'd rather not delve.

Holding back a sigh, Rick followed the others as they continued their upward trek. It would be another minute before the strange feeling was gone, two more before he trusted it was in fact the case. It made him scowl either way.

As they kept walking, the stream meandered through the forest for a while, twisting and turning its way as other smaller streams joined in. A few times they'd been unable to properly follow it since the terrain had gotten too tricky to maneuver. So they ended up needing to take multiple detours on their way up.

With every handful of meters up they went, the trees became thinner and smaller. They'd long since escaped the giant behemoths of wood and walked

along plant-life that was far closer to the kind they were more familiar with from back in their world. Pines weren't meant to be as high as skyscrapers, after all.

Twice they had breaks to freshen up and recover their breaths. The hours ticking by and Rick's stomach reminding him of his hunger several times despite all the water he drank.

And as the day was well past noon, they'd spotted a small crest on the climb. The trio rushed forward.

From it, they got a far better view of the surrounding terrain than they had until now. The world around them stretched far into the horizon- an actual true horizon. Above them the blue sky hung with a little cloud here and there. Behind them, a sea of verdant trees waved and drifted with the breeze. The titanic plant-life looked small, like a field of green wheat before summer came rolling through. To their right they saw the point where the mountains touched the woods, the trees covering barely the first third of the rocky surface before the stone shot upwards into the sky. The very peaks hidden behind angry black clouds.

"Smoke." Kat pointed at the thin line of black that rose from a spot in the forest.

"It must be where the bus is." Tomas frowned.

Rick couldn't quite hear them as he focused on what lay in front of him.

It was a mountain range, a colossus of jagged stone that protruded from the earth in a serrated irregular edge of snow-capped peaks. It extended and covered the entirety of his field of vision, from left to right. Dark rock and brown dirt mixed with glimmering snow in a splatter of massive proportions. The very top was so high up the snow had a bluish color to it, the clouds attempting to hide them in roiling swirls of gray and white.

The whole thing was so large, and yet so far away he was sure it would take them at least a week or two to reach the base. He frowned as he focused on the thunderclouds covering a considerable part of the ridge nearer to the

south. Lightning flashed across the black clouds- angry bolts that danced in an uncontrolled, erratic, rapid blink.

"Shit, that's one nasty storm."

"Well, that's one direction we're not heading in," Tomas chuckled nervously. "I hope it doesn't come our way."

"Don't jinx it."

"There." Rick pointed to the left, northward.

It was hard to see, but he'd managed to spot them. There were several thin pillars of smoke.

"Wait, do you...?" Kat focused on the white that rose in several steady columns. "Shit, do you think that's...!?"

"Maybe." The young teacher rubbed his chin in thought. "It's not exactly close, though. Look at how far the bus is. Considering it took us two days... I think it'd take us about the same amount of time to get there. Maybe a bit more."

"Tomorrow's the last day our food will be able to last us." Tomas looked at the other two. "Can we afford to take the risk?"

Rick's expression soured. "Can we afford not to?" It was easy to consider the potential route to take to reach the white smoke. It was a three-day walk following the edge of the forest. It shouldn't be too hard. The issue was that they were getting well outside Monica's territory, or pretty close to completely leaving it. How many monsters might catch their trail? How many could decide to hunt them down?

Rick turned to the two students. "Maybe you should head back to warn the others."

"Haha." She let out a dry laugh, glaring at him. "Fuck you. If you're going, then I'm going. Gramps needs help."

"That was my point." He frowned back at her. "The people at the bus don't have water, they're running out. People can only survive three days without it."

"No." This time it came from Tomas, the young man taking a long look at the teacher. "We're coming with you."

"And that settles that." Kat pointed at the white smoke that rose in the distance. "Time to get going, we don't have any to waste."

She had a point.

The teacher relented, though his gut felt queasy about the idea.

The feeling of being watched came back, and Rick held back from sighing.

Chapter 036 [Rick]

They took a day heading towards the thin columns of smoke they'd spotted earlier. They'd tried their best to follow the stream, though it kept meandering a bit too much for them to be able to stick to it all the time. The terrain was becoming trickier, mountain and forest leaving small cliffs and odd rocky formations that made them take detours from time to time.

Rick drank as much as he could to compensate for the rising hunger. The part of him that was glad at seeing the stream grow was in turn saddened when it became clearer it was turning Westward and away from the direction they were headed in.

Most notably, however, Monica had stopped vanishing into the forest as often. The few times she did vanish, they'd hear a roar off in the distance before she'd show up again.

"Is it just me or is she nervous?" Rick's question hung in the air as the feline leaned into him. He winced as she reached out and placed a clawed hand on his shoulder, pulling him closer to her.

"She looks like she wants a little more loving." Kat giggled, observing how the feline would trace the pad of her paw against the base of his neck.

Rick glanced up at Monica. She turned to look at him in turn, smiling. Her grip tightened a little as her ears twitched this way and that. She was paying closer attention to the forest around them as her hip bumped against Rick's lower ribs. He awkwardly returned the smile, trying his best not to stumble from having the weight of her paw on his shoulder.

Her smile brightened further at that, leaning to lick his cheek.

Kat began giggling harder.

"What sort of place do you figure the smoke was coming from?" Tomas coughed loudly. "There being smoke at all might be indicative of a rather

rural lifestyle."

"Oh! I hope there's, like, dungeons and dragons shit. Shoot lasers and cast fireballs."

"I did not take you for someone interested in that kind of thing." Rick quirked a brow.

Kat rolled her eyes. "Tried it once, too much math. I prefer the memes."

"I'm just hoping for someplace safe." The young teacher shook his head, glancing up at Monica as she was looking all around. His own gaze turned towards the trees that surrounded them, the monsters of wood and bark. "A part of me wants this to at least be within continental US, but..."

"We don't have trees this big," Tomas acknowledged with a nod. "We're not in Kansas anymore... as they say."

"Trees? Forget the trees, you're walking hand in hand with a six foot two catgirl beefcake." The young woman gestured at the feline. "A catgirl, Rick, do you know how crazy people would go over her back home? She'd be a fucking internet celebrity."

"And the Arachnae."

"And the rat gramps stayed behind with."

"Mouse."

"What?"

"Mouse, not rat," Tomas said. "Her ears were round and her tail was pink, and-"

"Who cares?" Kat growled. "Gramps stayed back with her and she might eat him in his sleep or something."

"I'd be more concerned Monica might do just that." The young student muttered.

"Meow?" The feline's head snapped to look at Tomas as soon as he'd spoken her name. Her ears were perked, eyes focused intently. He recoiled and lowered his gaze, and Monica tilted her head in curiosity in turn.

"Wait." Kat bubbled up a little. "Did she... recognize the name? This I got to see." Slowing down, the young student lagged a little behind the group. Rick could hear a little chuckle. "Marmot. Nothing? Morocco. Hm... Mono. Moniker?" The last one got a reaction. The feline glanced over her shoulder at her with a tilted head. "Oh shit, she DID recognize it. Monica."

"Meow-ic-a."

Kat giggled with a little shrill. "Monica." She hurried on over back to join the rest of the group, smiling from ear to ear. "Repeat after me, Moooo... niiiiii... caaaaaa."

"Meownic-aaah." She grimaced a little, sticking her tongue out. "Meownic-aaaaahhhh."

"Monica."

"Mow." The cat frowned. Turning forward, she opened and closed her mouth, scrunching up her face for a second. "Mownic-aah."

Rick arched a brow, not really able to escape her embrace. The progress was indeed surprising. He reached into the backpack and pulled out the water bottle, taking a good swing. A part of him hoped it could keep his stomach from growling.

"God, she's so close!" Kat giggled. "Monica! You can do it."

"Mown-"

Monica's whole body went rigid. The grip of her hand on Rick's shoulder became iron. He almost fell when she had stopped moving. The feline's face darkened, snapping to look somewhere to the left. Her ears perked up and her tail became still.

"What the..."

Monica let go of him, causing him to stumble as she leapt towards the nearest tree in a burst of movement. She was gone before any of them could even guess what was going on.

"Eesh, what do you figure drew her attention this time?"

"She definitely looked serious."

"I think... something worried her." Rick rubbed his chin, glancing ahead.

"Let's keep going."

"Worried? I'm betting she went out there to kick butt and hunt something tasty."

The sour note that lingered in her voice gave Rick pause. He glanced at her. "How much food do you have left?" He wondered under his breath, ignoring the tightness inside his gut.

"Tonight's the last meal." She shrugged.

"I can share some of mine with you." Tomas immediately perked up. "I'd been rationing it since we left. I've got enough for three more small meals."

"We'll have to ration water too once we get away from the stream." Rick could only glance at the running crystalline water that rolled its way through the forest. It was the only stretch of land that was devoid of trees on either side.

"Do you figure it's autumn over here?"

The question caught the teacher's attention. "Why do you ask?"

"The stream looks like it's in a riverbed that's larger than the stream itself. That kind of means the flow is low right now."

"Really hope winter isn't coming, or that it's not as sucky as the one back home. Do you know how awful it'd be having to do this whole survival shit with snow and frost and...?" Kat shuddered. "Next time I'm voting we get stranded near a beach."

Rick couldn't help himself. He laughed. "Amen to that."

"I think the forest is better," Tomas commented with a slight frown. "There's bound to be easier food around here."

"Nope, nope, and nope." The young woman playfully punched his shoulder. "You can't beat surviving at the coast. Water, fish, and palm trees and all the sunbathing one could hope for."

"I hadn't thought about fishing."

"You know what else you haven't thought of?" She bumped her hip against his own. "On the beach we'd get to use our swimsuits, and I've got the cutest string bikini ever."

The young teacher held back from chuckling as Tomas flushed.

The amusement came to an abrupt end when he felt he was being watched. It was a sensation he was becoming quite accustomed to. He looked over his shoulder, behind him, and then ahead. Where was she?

"Meow." Monica's voice rang out directly from above. Rick's head snapped upwards, spotting the feline hanging from one of the thick branches, her tail dangling as she dropped down without a sound. There was amusement in her eyes as she sauntered to him, reached forward with her large paw to show him something. "Rick."

The feline shoved something bloody and full of feathers against his chest. And with the utterance of his name, Kat cheered, laughing loudly.

But to him, it was almost a white noise. His eyes locked on the offered dead bird that was staining his shirt. She'd hunted this for him? He glanced at her, meeting her intense gaze in hesitation. "Rick," she said once more, pushing the dead bird against his chest until he grabbed it.

She nodded, patting his stomach and turning around. She jumped straight back into the woods.

"If we're speaking in Monica, I think that's a marriage proposal." Kat howled in laughter.

Chapter 037 [Rick]

"Rick and Monica, under a tree, k-i-s-s-i-n-g..." The smugness oozed out of Catherine. She'd purr if she were a feline.

"Could we... not?" Rick rolled his eyes as he held the piece of cloth that contained the lifeless animal. The thing was the size of his head, feathers and all, and none of them knew the species other than that it was a bird. Tomas had pointed out it definitely wasn't a carnivore because of its beak shape, but that was as far as their guess could go.

"You're the one who looked at the deadliest creature in the forest and claimed she was nervous. Seems she was looking for a way to confess her feelings."

"She does have a point." Tomas pointed out. "If Monica is bringing food, doesn't that mean we're not on the menu?"

"Maybe she's fattening him up."

Rolling his eyes, Rick just took a long swig from the bottle of water. His mind was abuzz. Had Monica picked up on his hunger? With those ears of hers, he was sure she could hear his stomach grumble a kilometer away, but there was another question burning through him. Why? Why had she given him the bird? Was she concerned about his wellbeing? That was... new.

"I think this is as far as we follow the little river." Tomas's hand pointed at the stream. It had turned sharply away from their path. "Should we make camp and refill?"

"Yeah, we should do that." Rick nodded, glancing down at the shirt he was holding. "I'd kill to have a pot to boil some water right about now."

"Mr. Gabriel taught us how to start a fire," Tomas offered. "But what would the pot be for?"

"Hot water makes it easier to pull the feathers out of the bird." He waved around the bloodied piece of cloth, catching the surprised look from the two. "What? It's meat, we're low on food."

"No, nothing, just..." Kat glanced at him for a moment. "Never took you for the kind that knew how to handle dead birds."

"I've got some family who owns a farm, I visit from time to time." He approached the stream to clean up the carcass.

"Oho! So you don't live in a cave under the school?"

"The proper name is the teacher's lounge." He let out a slight chuckle. "But if you must know, no, I only ever sleep at the university during the exam crunches."

"Are the rumors true? About the parties in the teacher cafeteria after hours?"

With a laugh, he nodded. "The closest we'd get to a party would be reading out loud a highlight of the dumbest exam answers of the semester. Whoever won would receive a wheel of cheese."

"That sounds a lot less wild than I expected it to be." She paused, frowning. "Wait, has my name ever popped up in those contests?"

"We didn't mention the student's names." Rick quickly lied, keeping his eyes on the bird he was having a very hard time dealing with. "Could you two start the fire? The sooner we burn this thing, the sooner we can eat the charcoal it'll turn into."

"Give us a minute, Tommy needs some help rubbing his wood."

The young man almost choked on his tongue, doing his best to focus on his task and follow the steps he'd been taught only a little over a day prior. His cheeks remained a deep crimson as he aimed his face straight down. The stick he was using snapped by the fourth attempt.

"I'll get some more twigs and branches."

"No." Rick's head jerked up from the chicken-bird-thing, glaring at Kat.
"Take Tomas with you."

"But he's doing the fire."

"And the fire can wait. Monica's not here."

"That'd leave you alone though." Kat frowned.

"Then you better not wander off too far."

There was a shared glare, but the young woman relented when Tomas stood up, adjusting his glasses. She caught the nervousness in his gaze and sighed, her shoulders drooping a little. "Let's get some sticky sticks."

Tomas hurried to catch up. His pace was a light jog that made her eyes linger on the peak of abs she could almost see whenever his shirt rose ever so slightly. She smirked as he noticed the look and blushed. Her smile broadened at that.

"I'm sure you're going to be of great help," she commented with a slight chuckle, reaching out and grasping his hand as they walked. His palm was calloused, big, and strong, yet his grip was hesitant and soft. "Carrying all the big sticks."

"Erm... sure."

His eyes met hers. The wink she sent him caused him to glance away. "And thus my master plan unfolds."

"Master plan?"

"Shh." She glanced over her shoulder over to the river, no longer able to spot their teacher. "I just wanted to continue where we left things off back in the cave. But asking you to come with me straight out would've been a bit too blatant."

"Oh... oh!" He went rigid. "But, the sticks, Rick, the-"

Kat leaned in, placing her hand against his firm chest. The mere touch left him stuttering. "Come on, he got some action with the sexy cat, not sure why we can't have some ourselves."

The sound of a growling stomach interrupted the moment. She blinked as she looked down at Tomas's shirt; she'd felt that through her fingers at the same time she'd heard it. The young man blushed all the harder as she burst into giggling.

"Alright, fair enough." She moved in to peck his cheek. "I do expect a little fun tonight, and you're going to help me."

"Help... you?"

"Monica has the hots for Rick."

"... really?"

"I don't think she could've been any more obvious. We just need to get her in the right mood and I'm sure we'll have all the privacy we could want."

"But, I mean, I-" His brows furrowed, looking at her through his thick glasses. "Are you sure? With... me?"

Now that was a can of snakes Catherine would not open. Her finger reached out to poke at his chest, making him take a step back. She put out a salacious grin. "It looks like you don't want to have some fun."

"It's just, all of this is so... sudden."

A little sigh escaped her. She took a step back, placing a hand on her hip and looking at him from head to toe. "And?"

"I mean, I-" He rubbed the back of his neck. "Do you want to, dunno, talk? We barely know each other."

Ah, so that's what it was. She nodded once. "I don't really think we should talk in terms of 'relationship' when we might have no food tomorrow." Grabbing his shirt, she pulled him in. She removed his glasses with one hand

and met his eyes, shooting him the best smoldering look she could summon. "Listen, maggot, this commanding officer has recruited you as moral support. Your mission is to kiss me, got it?"

That did the trick. Tomas leaned in and did just that. His large, hard arms wrapped around her against his broad chest. Kat almost giggled, but leaned harder into it instead.

Chapter 038 [Catherine][ish]

Kat kissed Tomas with some tentative curiosity. It reminded her of her first crush. A nice guy, impressive looks, no technique. And a lot of enthusiasm. Lots and lots of enthusiasm. "Down boy." She patted his hand as it crept up her thigh. Maybe she had a type?

Tomas' touch relented and pulled away, perhaps a bit too quickly for her tastes. Sometimes a gal enjoyed feeling irresistible, but she would not complain. It was always easier to nudge someone to do more than to rein them into holding back. Catching her breath, she adjusted her hair with her fingers, making sure her top hadn't shifted too much under his rough hands. "Sticks?"

"Sticks?"

"We came out here to look for sticks, remember?"

"Oh, right," the young man spoke, prying his eyes away from her and scratching his head, "sticks."

"Come on, you big lug, you were hungry, remember?"

"Yeah..."

They got moving rather quickly, busying themselves to find dry wood for the fire. It wasn't as hard as they'd expected it to be, and within only a handful of minutes they were back at the camp, watching Rick trying his best to gut the bird with a knife and washing it in the river. The teacher didn't pay them any attention, seeming more preoccupied with washing off the blood from the carcass. "Get the fire started."

"Since when did you have a knife?"

"I wish this were a knife, it's barely cutlery," he grunted the words out in exasperation. "Had plans on eating salad during the trip. Knife came with the

fork and spoon in the set." There was some obvious frustration seeping into his voice. "This is a fucking mess."

"I mean, it is a cute knife," Kat chuckled. "Have you seen Monica?"

"She popped in once or twice, went back to the forest right away."

"Must be busy looking for milk and honey."

"Or, you know, murdering things." The teacher turned to stare at them and froze. His eyes widened, his face became pale. "Don't... move."

"What? What is it?" Kat did not heed the warning, looking over her shoulder, following Rick's gaze and turning upwards.

She promptly met the eyes of a monster.

The creature lay face down flat against the trunk of the tree, stuck against its side, glued in place. She was a female, much like Monica and the spider had been, except where one had been feline or arachnid, this one looked more like a lizard. Her back was covered in green scales, and a thick reptilian tail waved behind her. Her eyes were a neon green that almost appeared to glow, and her face round and focused on Rick, holding his gaze.

"Don't move," the young teacher repeated in a whisper this time.

Kat cocked her head slightly, letting out a nervous chuckle. "Do you figure she'll like chocolate?"

"Are you crazy?" Tomas hissed under his breath, staying still next to the fire he was starting. His eyes kept darting between Kat and the monster. She could tell he was trying to figure out how quickly he could reach her. It was kind of sweet.

"Hey, it worked with Monica." She muttered under her breath, focusing on the lizard again. Those eyes were like gems. And as much as she wanted to feel nervous about it, there was a calmness to the creature that was kind of contagious.

Kind of surreal, really.

"I don't think we should rely on the power of chocolate."

"Then you underestimate chocolate."

"Both of you, cut it." Rick's growl made itself clear. "I think she wants the bird."

Kat snapped towards the teacher. "No way, that's our dinner!"

"I'd rather it be the bird than us."

"Fuck that." Kat didn't hesitate, stepping back and reaching into her backpack, pulling out a candy bar. "Hey, scaly girl!" The voice drew the creature's attention downward, meeting the young girl's eyes and tilting her head ever so slightly. The human nodded in acknowledgment. "Look, sweets. You wanna?"

The monster's gaze turned from her face to the candy bar being waved above Kat's head. Blinking once, twice, and then thrice, she opened her mouth. A glob of flesh shot out, enveloping Kat's palm. The young woman shrieked and pulled away as the two meter long tongue returned to its confines within the scaly monster's mouth. The noise startled the creature as she turned and climbed up the tree, very slowly chewing on the treat she'd just snagged.

"Ew, slimy." Kat shook her hand, trying to get rid of the slime and glancing up at the monster. Still, there was a very large smirk on her face. She'd proven the power of chocolate was absolute. "You're welcome!"

The lizard stopped her upward crawl to look down and blinked down at her, licking her lips and shifting position. For a moment she appeared to want to go back down, but she halted as her eyes shifted to scan the sky above. An annoyed sound left the creature's lips. She turned around and continued climbing up the tree, vanishing into the branches in seconds.

"Dang it."

"Wash your hand," Rick warned, his eyes scanning the woods carefully. "We don't know if that shit's poisonous or not."

A deep sigh. "Aye, aye."

"You really shouldn't have done that."

"Done what? The same thing you did with Monica?" She quirked a brow. "I'd figure that having more of the monsters wanting to hunt some birds for us wouldn't be a bad thing."

The young teacher glanced at her as she sank her hands into the river and began rubbing her palms together. "What do you figure will be Monica's reaction when she meets the lizard? Because my bets are on cat food."

That knocked the wind right out of Kat's enthusiasm. She let out a heavy sigh and continued scrubbing. It would be awhile before she got completely rid of the gooey substance the tongue had left behind. By then, Rick and Tomas had started the fire and were spinning the dead bird's carcass above the flames. Their objective was to make sure it was overcooked since neither trusted what disease may or may not be here. Parts of the flesh had charred already.

Regardless, the scent was divine compared to stale, damp sandwiches and crackers. It made their mouth's water, and that alone put Rick on edge as he kept looking around for a potential return of the lizard lady.

Which had left him oblivious to the return of the cat lady.

He all but screamed as she hugged him from behind. His eyes shot at the giggling Kat and chuckling Tomas. "You saw her coming and said nothing."

"Better sharpen those senses, Rick."

"Purr?" The wild woman hugged his back, but she was focused on the bird. She was sniffing the air and licking her chops. It was very clear she agreed the meal looked rather scrumptious.

A wicked thought crossed Kat's mind. "Hey, Monica, look," she called out, drawing the feline's attention as she turned to look at Tomas. "Kiss!"

And no sooner did she speak than she stole the young man's lips in a glossy mashing of lips. She put on a show, wrapping her arms around his neck and leaning into it, cooing happily and caressing his shoulders as he tensed before melting into the embrace.

She spotted the feline turning to shoot a look of amusement at Rick. Before he could react, she had pinned him down and taken his lips with her own. The purring was loud, like an idling chainsaw, her rump high in the air and her tail lashing back and forth.

Kat inwardly cheered at a successful operation. "Well, it seems you two are busy, we'll leave you to it." She moved to take the bird out of the flames to avoid having it burn entirely. "Tomas, let's give the two lovebirds some space."

The young man blushed as he caught the look in her eyes, nodding very quickly as he followed. Kat was going to make sure to give him quite the show.

Chapter 039 [Rick]

The night found itself with two couples sharing a rather passionate encounter. Monica did not appear to care about having initiated things right in front of Tomas and Kat whatsoever. Nor did she care to notice them moving away from her and Rick, her focus being entirely on the young teacher. The feline proved as insatiable and eager as the last time, if perhaps now she'd been more careful. Every time the young teacher winced, she would slow down and retract her claws to avoid further scratching his back. But that did not make her any less enthusiastic. The teacher, for his part, inwardly cursed at Kat for having started this mess and did his best to at least wait for the others to leave.

Only a handful of meters away and at the other side of the tree, the other couple was far less uncontrolled and far more cautious. Awkward little fumbles in the dark and half-spoken apologies from Tomas that were constantly quietened by Kat's tongue. The young man was eager and impatient, half the time unsure where to focus on. Kat moved with a bit more practice, teasing him and reveling in the sensation of his hardened body as she took claim of his lap with her thighs. They made out to the sound of the fucking happening nearby. The sound was certainly pushing Kat's buttons, though Tomas took a while longer to relax enough to warm up to the idea.

And once the revelries had come to an end, Tomas and Kat waited for Monica's snores before they returned to the fire to lie down and sleep.

No one noticed Monica woke up in the middle of the night to finish off the cooked chicken until morning came. Or so they suspected, as they could not think of any other reason why the prepared meal would be missing along with the feline, but she had dropped two dead birds next to the warm coals.

"Seems she left pretty clear instructions of what she wants."

"I am not going to pluck those on my own," Rick growled, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "Hell, I'm not sure we should waste any more time here."

"We're continuing north, and the stream doesn't," Tomas pointed out. "Might as well take the chance to use it to clean the carcass while we can. I'll help."

Monica popped in when they had finished cooking the two new birds. Rick was sure she'd been spying on them throughout the whole thing.

"Aw, she brought more birds for you," Kat giggled, watching the three that were dropped on his lap. And the eager look she gave him, licking her lips and grinning.

"And we can't stick around to make them." He took one of the cooked ones and handed it over to Monica, splitting the other one three-ways with the other two. "Let's get moving."

"Rick."

He turned around to look at Monica as she ripped off one of the legs and gave it to him. Her eyes lingered on him for only long enough to confirm he'd grabbed the piece of bone and meat before she began to ravage her own meal. The feline purred loudly as she ate.

"Awww, she loves you!"

Looking at the drumstick, he blinked at her. "... thanks." It was a strange sensation. He was still not sure what to make out of it.

"Careful Rick, first she gives you food. Next thing you know, she's dragging you back to her cave so you can give her kitties snu-snu style." No sooner had she spoken the words that Tomas grew pale, head whipping towards Kat as she laughed. "Oh, come on, I'm a big girl, I know how to handle myself." She slapped his shoulder. "Trust me, I don't want kitties."

"I see." The words came from the teacher, and it made the young woman stiffen up.

Her shoulders straightened as she threw a glare at him. "What? Going to lecture me?" Her brow furrowed.

Rick arched a brow. "No, I was going to comment that it was low of you to do what you did last night. Especially if it's just so you and Tomas can have fun."

That knocked the wind out of her sails. She chuckled. "Oh, like you didn't enjoy getting puss' puss."

Rick took a long moment of silence, looking at Kat with an even gaze. "I don't think Monica quite understands what 'No' means, Kat. Do you think I could have stopped her if I wanted?"

The question was a bucket of cold water. She shivered and lowered her gaze. "No, you're right, I... didn't mean it that way."

He nodded. "I know. Just keep it in mind next time."

"She's still an awesome lay, I bet."

Groaning, Rick ignored the comment, starting to move ahead. The others followed, Monica happily devouring the cooked meal. She appeared to care little for the bones. They snapped and crunched with every bite. Apparently Monica was not going to leave anything behind. Out of the four of them, the feline was looking to be the happiest. Tomas a close second. He seemed unable to fight against the smile that kept creeping up his face every time he stopped paying attention.

Meanwhile, the young teacher was the one that kept glancing around and trying to keep his focus on everything that wasn't the naked Monica. There was a knot of strange feelings inside his chest that would blossom each time he'd look at her curves. More so by the fact that she noticed these stares and would make sure to give him a smoldering smirk each time.

She did not run off anywhere, sticking around and walking with them. Rather than hunt, she'd just eat the uncooked fowl she'd brought. The feline offered some of it to Rick each time, but he turned her down while trying to keep his stomach from revolting. Cooked it was decent, but raw? He wasn't starving hard enough to consider that just yet.

The forest was thinning out, the trees were ever so slowly shrinking in size, becoming more numerous and smaller. The shift was slow but noticeable once he'd started paying attention. More light was streaming through. The branches above were no longer behemoths of wood capable of supporting an entire house. It took hours of walking, but bit by bit the roots were vanishing. Their steps were easier to take. Bushes popped up here and there. A few even had berries on them.

Large, round, baseball sized purple berries. They took a few, though didn't eat any of them. It made the most sense to test them out during the break rather than while hiking through the woods.

Then came a slight drizzle that rained down on them. It had caught them by surprise, drenching them as they hurried for cover. It lasted a whole five minutes before stopping. "Not a cloud in sight." Rick muttered, glancing at the sky. "A summer shower, huh?"

"Maybe that means we're in summer." Kat chuckled.

"Hey, I see something."

Tomas's words made them stop and turn to the direction to their side he was pointing to. They focused for a moment. There was something bright green that was shifting about at ground level. And something else. Rick frowned. "Is that..."

"I think it is!" Tomas' voice dripped with excitement as the group adjusted their direction.

"It's wheat!" Kat proclaimed, running ahead. "There! There! Do you see it!?" She enthusiastically pointed at the brown and gray building in the distance. "It's a farm!"

Rick had abruptly halted.

It would be more precise to claim he'd been stopped. Monica had grabbed his hand and tugged him, keeping him from being able to move forward another step. She was rooted in place, staring at the farm through narrowed

slits. Her hackles were raised, fangs out in the open, and ears flat against her head.

She growled at the building ahead.

Chapter 040 [Rick]

Rick's shoulder hurt as Monica held it in a vice-like grip while she growled at the farm. She did not move, the human had to take a moment to look at the ranch and then back at Monica. The others had stopped at the blood curdling rumble the feline let out.

"What's got her so pissy?"

"I don't think she's angry." Her grasp made him wince. "She's afraid." The words came out without consideration, there was something about that glare, her tension, the way she almost seemed ready to bolt.

"Our girl doesn't do scared, Rick, just look at her." Kat waved at the growling.

It was hard for him not to agree. He certainly felt intimidated by the display. But his gut told him there was something that was making her nervous. He stepped closer to her, stroking the paw that kept his shoulder trapped in a vice-like grip. "Monica."

The name snapped her from the growl. Her eyes looked down at him. She loosened her grasp on his hands, letting go just enough not to hurt, but she didn't let him pull out. Her brow furrowed. "Rwick," she replied, tugging gently at him, trying to urge him to move away from there.

She was turning around, nudging him to return to the forest.

His mind flashed to the bus, to the people there. To Charlie and his empty eyes and the spider. Rick dug his heels in. "No." His proclamation made her stop. She looked down at him, and the slight frown changed into a glare. "Monica, no, I can't go back."

"Rick."

"No." He turned towards the farm, gesturing at it. "I need to go there."

She dug her heels. "Rick."

"No, Monica, no." Pulling his hand, he tried to escape her grasp- a failed attempt that made her expression falter. "Monica, we need to get there, we need help." Their eyes met. The feline looked at him unblinking.

"Rick." This time it came with a growl. Her paw tightened, her fangs gleamed, and she yanked him a step closer. Her other claw grasped his head and forced him to peer up into her blue-green orbs. "Rick!" There was urgency there now.

He felt a shudder go down his spine. Every instinct in his body screamed to run and not stop. Tightening his fists, he met her gaze in full. "If you take me away, I will never forgive you."

Perhaps it was the tone, or the way he said it, or maybe something else. Maybe Monica had gleamed part of the meaning. She reacted, eyes widened like platters at the proclamation. He was sure she hadn't understood the words themselves, but the look in her eyes spoke of how she'd gotten the message all the same. He pulled his shoulder out of her grasp. His first step away from her was tentative, hesitant. The second was surer.

Her grasp had faltered and, for a moment, Monica appeared as if struck.

She stood there, looking at him. "Rick!" She called out, reaching at him but not grabbing a hold as he took the third step. He met her pained gaze, and his resolve wavered. For a fraction of a second he could see the possibility to turn back, go to the bus, and have Monica help them take everyone to safety. Or maybe go around, find somewhere else that didn't cause the feline to feel intimidated. There had to be something dangerous here, right?

But did they have the time? Would they have the luck?

"Please, we need you." He turned to face the farm, gesturing at her to follow.

The woman's gaze lingered on him as she looked past him and to the wheat, the building, the river. Her claws extended as her shoulders tightened, heels

digging into the dirt and fangs coming back out. It was clear, she would not follow.

The snarl faltered with his next step towards the ranch. "Rick," she spoke as he took another, turning his back to her. "Rick!" His gut wrenched into a ball of knots, his eyes focused on the farm ahead. "RICK!" She roared.

"Are you sure about this?" Kat whispered, glancing back at the feline. "We can just... you can stay here while we... Maybe the ranch's dangerous."

"It might be. So you two stay here and wait for my signal."

Tomas and Kat shared a glance as the young teacher walked past them. "Rick, I-"

"No, Tomas," he snapped at the young man. "I can't send you to something that might get you killed. You're safer here for now."

"If she's scared, then..."

"Then we still don't have a choice. We can't just sit and wait. People are going to die the longer we take to get help."

Whatever the faces or reactions either of them had, he didn't pay them any attention.

"She's gone."

That made Rick snap. He turned around to frown at Kat, the young woman staring at the spot Monica had occupied a moment ago. She was no longer there; she was nowhere to be seen. And just like that, the tightness in his gut was a rock that had been thrown down a well.

"Stay put."

Rick shifted to look at the farm and continued to move closer. Confusion welled up inside his chest as he tried to push it aside. He had to keep moving. His mind summoned a million different things that could go wrong the moment he strode into the green fields that stretched between the forest

and the ranch. And as the trees ended, those images became ever more gruesome. The first of which being someone shooting him for trespassing, but everything that came after involved more monsters popping out of the greens and tearing him to shreds.

Rick realized he'd stopped right where the wheat began. Clenching his fists, he steeled his resolve.

With a deep breath, he stepped out of the woods. Thunder rumbled in the distance, it made Rick glance upwards. The sun was shining through some clouds. But the noise had come from the mountains to the right, they were enveloped in dark cotton that flashed with streaks of light. Tearing his gaze away from the incoming storm, Rick's eyes inspected the terrain. Flat, it was all covered in a green grass-like vegetation, shrubbery, and the odd tree littering the fields. He saw a river running down through the property, splitting it in two.

The closer he got, the clearer things became.

The fence surrounding the farmland was made of stone, and it was broken, in many places, entire sections missing, especially on either side of the small river. The bridge that connected either side was built out of wood and was moldy, the foundations worn out and somewhat dug out at some points.

It made Rick frown in concern. This indeed looked like signs of civilization, but it had clearly been abandoned. How long ago? He couldn't take a guess. His steps grew more cautious as he approached the main building they'd spotted earlier.

It was built out of smooth stone, two stories high. The outside had been white once upon a time, now it was gray and dry mud stained the outer walls of the first floor. The plant-life had invaded the area, small bushes and grass grew around the building. Vines were stretching out through the back wall.

Rick looked around, spotting a handful of smaller buildings that were in a greater state of disrepair. Made out of wood, their walls and roofs were caved in, trees bloomed through the debris. Nothing hinted at how long ago

this had been abandoned, or why. His gaze turned towards the door leading into the main building.

A bolt of lightning crossed the sky.

A light drizzle began to fall.

Ignoring the rain, Rick closed in on the structure cautiously.

Chapter 041 [Rick]

Even with the falling rain, Rick approached the building with a careful step, wary of potential occupants. The house was two stories tall; it was likely the main home, judging by the layout at least. The structure had windows but no glass. There were shutters made of wood that appeared to have been put there, meant to close the rectangular holes, but they were rotting and partially falling off. If not for the white paint and the exactness in the finish in the stone, he would've considered the whole thing to be rather medieval. There was something off about it, even though he couldn't quite put his finger on what exactly.

Frowning, he tried to ignore the rain and carefully peer through the open door into the building. The entrance led to a foyer, moss dotted every corner. It wasn't painted, rotting wood decorated the walls. The smell was humid and stale; the floor was covered with broken tiles, small stones, and pieces of loose vegetation.

With a brief pause, Rick leaned down to look at the tiles more closely. They weren't crushed, only fractured, and raising one tile he found cold gray smooth stone underneath. Cement? Stone cut smooth cement, worn, cracked paint, but no glass? His mind whirled as he stepped further inside, finding the increasing gloom something that put him on edge.

He thought of where he'd left his cellphone last and grimaced, he'd given it to Barry. With a contained sigh he focused on the now and not in the uncomfortable memory that gnawed at him. The house was silent, and the human tried his best to keep it that way. The crunch of sand under his steps still felt as loud as gunshots, but the pitter-patter of rain began drowning it out.

Carefully Rick pushed further in, taking a right at the foyer and finding himself looking at what appeared to be a kitchen. The cupboards were all flung open or falling off, rotten; the floor was littered with dirt and moss. Cracks and mud adorned the walls where the wood had fallen off. It took him

a moment to realize there was no sink nor faucet. There was also a door that led underground at the corner. He peered down into the darkness.

There was a sound coming from down there, a soft rhythmic tinker. Closing his eyes, he recognized it. Dripping water.

"Nope."

He would be blind down there, and if it was flooded, then it would be even less of a reason to go there. He limited himself to give a quick look around the kitchen, finding nothing that could shed a light on what had happened or when. There were only moldy wooden plates and a single fork that had rusted almost beyond recognition.

Turning around, he went to the other side of the bottom floor. A dining room. The windows here had their shutters torn either from age or something else. It was far better illuminated than the kitchen. Outside, the rain was becoming more intense. It left Rick wondering if he should go get the others. No, he had to finish checking the area to make sure it was safe.

With that self-reminder, he opted to ignore potential clues and instead check whether there was anything else here. His eyes glanced at the cement stairs that led to the second floor. Sighing, he steeled his nerves and made his way up.

The sound of the rain on the rooftop became louder as he moved. He could barely hear his steps. Eyes peeled, he froze when a flash illuminated everything from outside.

Lightning. One Mississippi, two Mississ-

BOOM

That had been close, VERY close. It rattled the structure and walls. It made him flinch, but he couldn't let himself be distracted. Rick finished ascending to the second floor, keeping his tour of the place to the minimum. He spotted three rooms- two with bed-frames, and one with a desk. He didn't see any

bathrooms. Not seeing anything else in the house, he relaxed, turning around and heading back down.

Stepping outside, he turned towards the woods and tried to spot Kat and Tomas, waving his arms over his head to quietly signal them to come over as best he could. He wasn't able to spot either of them, though. Not wanting to shout, he used his backpack as improvised cover from the rain and hurried to the river. Squinting, he spotted a speck of light in the forest that waved back.

His hopes rose, and soon enough he saw both former students running across the field doing their best to stay dry with their backpacks. The teacher nodded, waving them over as he waited next to the bridge.

‘RICK!’

The voice slammed against his thoughts like a brick through a window. It had come from neither Kat nor Tomas, but from somewhere that felt both far away and nearby. Almost as if screamed into his thoughts. And with it came the notion of impending danger.

Rick's head snapped to the left, upstream. The river had grown muddy, wide, fast, its water lapping against the base of the bridge hungrily. But that was not what had made his heart forget to beat.

It was the flood that was rushing their way, the wall of water had broken out past its shores and ate up the land with furious, unstoppable force. "MOVE!" He shouted at the two who had seen where he'd been looking at and pushed for a dead sprint. The bridge groaned under them, and they broke into a run all the harder once at the other side.

The flash flood slammed against the remains of the fences at the edge of the farm, eating them and submerging them in the muddy current. It was closing in on them and fast. The three of them ran towards the house as fast as they could, the only place in sight that was safe.

The mud gave and slipped under Rick's foot. He tripped, falling. He scrambled to get back up. Tomas was the first one to make it to the building,

having gotten a decent headway to the others. Kat was close behind by mere virtue of being dragged there by him.

"Straight in, second floor!" Rick shouted over the clap of thunder up above.

The wave of water slammed against him just as he'd made it all the way to the edge of the building. His body was like a rag doll as he felt the outer wall of the house hit him from the other side. His hands reached out to grab anything he could find. They found purchase at one window.

The stream threatened to drag him away, to sink him in. The mud swirled all around him. His skull was underwater; he couldn't breathe. His fingers were slipping against the stone while he desperately pulled himself closer. The river rose further, its pull becoming impossible to fight against.

A hand grabbed him and yanked.

Rick sputtered and coughed, damp from head to toe, feeling the flood washing against his knees as the hands dragged him forward. Half-blind, he followed, steps splashing against water as he was pulled up the stairs.

The young teacher collapsed, breathing hard and laying on his back.

"... thanks." His eyes turned to Tomas, he was covered in mud and looking equal parts panicked and proud.

"It was... nothing," he panted.

"Fuck that was close." Kat's voice rang in his ears, drowned out only by a crack of thunder from outside. Her phone flashed its light to everything surrounding them.

Sitting up, the teacher glanced down the stairs. The water was lapping against the first steps.

And it was rising.

Chapter 042 [Mark][🗨️]

The crack of thunder was something Mark barely paid any attention to as he moved through the woods. Veronica had a hard time keeping the pace, the young man looked possessed. With barely any sleep and refusing to eat or drink more than the bare minimum, his condition was deteriorating. It had been several days walking through the woods. Their westward direction was almost as meaningless as any other, but it was better to move than to stay still and die.

The forest had only appeared darker and more threatening as they moved through it. Even in his altered state of mind, Mark was aware they'd yet to escape the threats that lived between these wooden behemoths.

Day cast a permanent gloom through the trees, and strange noises kept making them look every which direction. Twice they'd hidden when something had felt too close for comfort. From what? They couldn't tell, only that they would not dare continue until they were sure the threat had passed.

"This is meaningless."

It had been the first proper words out of Mark that hadn't been grunts since Barry had been taken.

Veronica sat next to him, huddling closely between the roots of the tree as they made sure it was a nice, secluded spot that was well out of sight.

"Surviving is meaningless?"

With a grunt, he clenched the backpack close against his chest. "We were always together."

She nodded a little at his words, thankful that the darkness hid the roll of her eyes. "Tough family situation?"

"Something like that." Snorting, he shook his head. "The bitch didn't help."

"If it's any consolation, she's probably dead by now."

"Haha, good one." His smile was sour. "That woman lives from the suffering of others. Pretty sure she's the reason dad blew his head off."

"Geesh, why don't you talk about something less dark, like strangling puppies?" She bumped his shoulder with hers. "Come on, there's plenty to live for. If nothing else to spite the hag."

"I guess there's that." Mark looked straight ahead. His laugh was humorless, empty.

The young woman glanced at him for the longest second. She realized where things might lead if left untouched. The thought brought a grimace to her face. Her eyes turned to his own. A slight frown emerged. Opening her backpack, she picked out the zip-log bag they'd used to store the purple fruit they'd picked out of some bushes. With a sigh, she opened it and pulled one out.

"What're you doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing?" She quirked her brow at him. "Food's almost out, water's kinda out the window, and you're thinking of suicide. If you're gonna die, we might as well go out seeing if these fucking things are edible or not."

She placed one on his lap and sat back down next to him. Veronica toyed with her own between her fingers, watching as Mark picked it up and looked.

"Fuck it." He bit down, a gush of purple fluid exploding from his mouth and drenching his jaw and shirt. "Oh fuck."

"How is it?" She wondered, now looking more carefully.

"Tastes like cough medicine." He replied, gagging a little but taking another bite. "And..." A little shudder ran through him, a pleasant sigh escaping his lips. "It's not bad. I feel... light."

"Mhm." She twirled the fruit in her fingers, keeping her focus on him. "Tell me if things tingle."

"There's... some tingling." Grunting, he closed his legs tighter together. It was hard to see in the darkness, but she was rather certain he was blushing. A sharp breath followed and a groan. "Oh shit, that..."

"What is it? Maybe you should puke it."

"No, it's..." His gaze turned to her. There was something there she recognized quite well, she'd seen it on the face of dozens of frat boys in parties. A slight unfocused edge to his vision, a dilation of the pupils.

Before she had a chance to react, he'd turned to kiss her. It was rough and tasted of raspberry syrup. She was half of a mind to let him continue. A sense of panic bloomed as her mouth tingled as his saliva spread down her throat and through her body. It ran through her in a shudder that left her warm and hazy.

"Oh wow, this..." There was a pooling, gooey sensation in the pit of her stomach. She was aroused? "This is intense."

"Want a bite?"

"Fuck it."

She took the offered half-eaten fruit, biting down and swallowing it. The taste was thick, intense. It turned everything up ten notches. It was like she'd been plugged into an electric socket. Her whole body lit up. The young woman became intensely aware of every inch of skin. From the roughness of her socks to the tightness of her belt and the constriction of her shirt. This time, she dove back in and kissed Mark.

There was some concern about being seen or heard, but it was like a flag in a storm. It wasn't possible to hold on any longer, ripped out, lost in the swirl of wind and fire. She couldn't get her shirt off fast enough. Mark was eager to help. In the darkness of the forest they made out each other's silhouettes. Lips mashed together in effervescent desire.

More and more they lost the ability to keep coherent thought. There was just barely enough for them to fumble against each other's bodies. Mark reached

down between her thighs and found her ready without needing any preamble. Veronica found the same between his legs. They throbbed for one another.

The woman didn't hesitate, lowering herself on his lap and feeling him stretch her out. A whimper escaped her. The sensation was driving her wild, his hands finding their way to her breasts. "Rougher." She pleaded, and he obliged, the kneading turning into pinching. "More."

Mark mauled her with his mouth and fingers. All she could do was thrust herself down into his erection. The pressure of his shaft pumping into her once more knocked the air out of her. She'd never been this sensitive before. It was as if the whole of the universe had boiled down to one thing and one thing only: sex.

She couldn't get enough of it. When the young man moved his hands to force her to move faster, she moved her own hands to keep up the assault on her tits. Her small size had often left her lovers focusing on other parts of her anatomy, but today it was the only thing she was able to think of. She needed to get off harder, more.

Their pace quickened, turning into a furious blur between his rough hands moving her whole body and her helping with every thrust. Mark came. She could feel the hot seed spilling into her. And yet, all Veronica could do was to keep going. He wasn't softening, and she'd yet to get off. He groaned and squirmed as she rode him hard.

Orgasm tumbled through her, a fiery tsunami that shattered her thoughts and left her devoid of everything but the sensation. Nothing but sex. Nothing but wanting more. She wrapped her arms around her lover and ground her pussy slowly, pressing her clit into his pubic hair, enjoying every shuddering, thundering jolt of sensation.

"More," she whispered into his ear, locking his lips and muffling their voices as they became further lost in each other's bodies.

At the same time, in another area of the forest, Barry Dodson woke up and screamed.

Chapter 043 [Barry]

Barry Dodson was in agony. Unconsciousness had brought him peace and calm, but now that it was gone and the pain pierced through both of his ankles. It was a palpitating fire that burned within and around his bones. His skin was swollen, likely red, almost as if his calves were ready to burst out, and the agony inside beat to the rhythm of his heartbeat.

With darkness surrounding him, dirt under his hands and his legs exploding into white-hot suffering with every twitch of his body, he only had one option. He screamed.

The next instant, a hand fell onto his shoulder and another clapped itself over his mouth, sealing it. "Shut the fuck up," the voice whispered, a low angry hiss. The darkness was too absolute. Barry couldn't see who it was that was covering his mouth. He tried to scream again, but it came out muffled.

He could taste dirt, as the palm pressed his head down against the ground. The other hand had grasped his throat and tightened just enough to make him choke for breath. "Scream again and I will kill you." It was a she, definitely a she. Her voice was a low growl, but her grip was the strongest Barry had ever felt. Like an iron vice.

Pushing back against the pain, the young man shuddered, nodding slowly as best he could and tightening his body to stop the burning in his ankles.

"They broke your legs so you can't escape," the woman said, loosening her grasp on his mouth. Her words were a light whisper. "Whoever shouts the loudest usually gets chosen first. Keep your mouth shut or you'll get eaten."

A slight whimper followed. Barry tensed. The image of fangs and claws flashed across his mind. He could still remember the scent of fresh blood from when the feline had entered the bus that night. "Where... where are we?" He cringed through the agony. His breathing was shallow, and his hands tightened into fists.

Now that she'd let him go, he couldn't sense anything other than the dirt underneath his back.

"Their lair."

"Their?"

"The feral's." A huff followed. "Did they do in your girls?"

"What?"

"Your team." The woman kept her voice low. There was anger in her tone. "Did the ferals kill them?"

"I don't..." The young man shook his head and winced. The pain throbbed and his whole body became rigid. With the stabbing sensation coming from his ankles, his thoughts spun their wheels without traction. Barry collapsed, panting and breathing hard. "We were running to find help, and now..." Hot tears rushed down his cheeks. He slammed his clenched fists against the dirt. "Now I'm going to get eaten."

A tight sob escaped him. The young man reached out to cover his face with his arm. His whole body shook with so many emotions that the only thing he could do was muffle his voice against his sleeve. Had all of this been for nothing? Just to go out and die in some ditch?

The darkness gnawed at his welling despair. He couldn't feel anything else. The woman who'd quietened him a moment ago had gone silent. Was there anything in this blackness? He faintly heard the pitter-patter of rain off in the distance.

Barry pulled out the hard lump that lay in his right pocket: the phone with the smashed screen his teacher had given him. The dim glow brought light, and with it, blindness. Barry winced and covered his eyes. On either side of him, he heard several squeaks and gasps. The human flinched as the mobile was snatched out of his grip.

In the weird dim white glare of the screen, he met the gaze of several others that, at first, had looked like women. But it was made apparent most of them were just like the other monsters out there.

To his left was the smallest of the three. She was a frail, thin young creature, her body covered in a light grey fur, and her ears round and torn atop her head. A mouse. Her legs were twisted at odd angles- her left wrist as well. She was curled against a dirt wall and keeping as far as she could from the others. Her black eyes were wide with terror as she kept herself curled into a tight ball.

To his right were two others. The first was an equally naked monster, and just as female as the first. Her skin was a light tan, but what caught Barry's attention were her arms: they were wings. Covered in large brown feathers, the limbs were twisted and long, tightly squeezing against her body. She kept her head hidden between both limbs, a bed of short blond hair atop her head.

And then, there was the one that had taken the mobile phone from him.

Unlike the others, she wasn't scared- but more importantly, she wasn't naked.

The young woman wore long, dirt-stained cotton blue pants that reached all the way to her ankles. There were tears and holes there, her dark chocolate skin showing some scars underneath where the holes had been present, mingled with open cuts and some bruises. Her feet were bare, and her torso was covered by a light short-sleeved shirt that had once been white but was different shades of brown now. Barry couldn't help but notice how well built she was compared to the other two. Her arms showed some muscle definition, and her almond shaped face certainly looked far better nourished.

Barry felt as if he was looking at an aspiring MMA fighter. Everything about the way she occupied the space she lived in screamed confidence. Which was the same reason why the black leather collar around her throat caught his attention, as if it were glowing in the dark.

Her green eyes weren't focused on him though- they were focused on the mobile phone, frowning at the broken screen and poking it before turning it this way and that. "What kind of device is this?"

"It's... It's a phone." Barry wheezed through quick breaths. "But it's just a glorified flashlight now."

"Do you have any lepi?"

"What?"

"Purple round fruit; grows in bushes. Eat it for fun, rub on injuries to heal. Locals had an unfamiliar name for it." She had a deep scowl as she spoke, gesturing at her swollen ankles.

"I don't... I haven't seen anything like that." Barry shook his head. "I have so many questions." A hollow laugh left him as he glanced around. They were in a pit of some sort, maybe four or so meters deep and twice that across.

Up above, past the edge of the hole, there was only darkness.

"They're going to have to wait, she's here."

"What?"

And just as he spoke, the shadows within the hole came to life. Barry remembered what had happened back during the fight before he was taken. His eyes widened as he saw the shadows grow and gain volume. The powerful canine figure emerged, her eyes locked onto the tan-skinned woman, who glared back.

"Come at me, feral mutt, get close. I dare you." Her hands glowed a dull green as she raised them.

The canine woman snorted, turning around and glancing at Barry. The young human stiffened, icy dread running down his back for the split second it took the monster to look away and focus on the mousy one.

The shrieks became deafening as she reached down to the squirming creature. Silence followed as they were both swallowed by the shadows, only to return from outside the hole, out of sight. The cries rose, becoming sharper and higher.

And with a sharp crunch, it came to a sudden end.

Barry's whole body tightened, pale and shivering, as his hand covered his mouth. He could only lay there and listen to the sudden rush of howls and barks, and the wet crunch of something else that he didn't want to think about.

The dark-skinned woman grimaced, the glow on her hands dying out as she growled, shaking her head. "Turn that thing off, it's annoying and I need to conserve my strength."

The young man hesitated, looking down at the broken phone with the picture of a black cat curled up into a ball and snoozing behind the locked screen. Barry turned his gaze at her, hand lingering in his left pocket. There was a wrapper there, some leftover meal from the trek. Probably the last one he'd have.

His thoughts lingered on her glowing hands. "If you had the strength to fight, would you be able to help us get out of here?"

Her face cracked into a smirk, the woman leaning back against the wall and letting out a laugh. "Why should I help you?"

Chapter 044 [Barry]

Barry couldn't believe his ears. He might have been woozy and short of breath from the pain coming from his legs, but he was rather sure he'd heard the nameless woman rather clearly. "What do you mean 'why'!? Did you not hear them eat that girl!?"

His words rang out, making the winged monster flinch and shrink further.

"Why should I let you get out of here?" The tanned woman arched a brow, rolling her eyes. "I might have a collar, but I am no slave to humans."

"Humans? What?" He scowled. "You're not human?"

As soon as he'd asked, he took a moment to look her over again. The sculpted muscles, the dark skin, the frayed wild black hair. Nothing about her was out of place, not in the way the monsters were. No fur, no feathers, no tail or weird parts.

"Did you miss the glowing hands?" She raised her hand. A dim greenish light flickered around it before dying instantly. "Are you really that dense?"

"I don't- I'm not from here, ok?" He shook his head in frustration. "We were going on a school trip, then we crashed into this nightmare. We were looking for help!"

"Tough luck, I don't help humans." The woman shrugged, laying back against the wall and closing her eyes. "Doesn't matter anyway, your girls aren't going to come for you, and mine's likelier to stumble her way into a trap than successfully track something through the forest."

Barry frowned at her, tightening his fists. "I'm not from here. I don't know what you are, and I don't know where we are."

"You said that already."

"It's true."

"Mhm, you're an off-worlder, and I'm the Great Sage." She waved her hand and snickered. "If you're an off-worlder, then you should be able to handle something as meager as a hole."

"I don't..." Barry looked up at the lip of the hole, then down at his broken legs, and the slight oddness in their bend. Worst of all was the throbbing pain that kept needling the back of his head, threatening to explode forth the instant he moved. "How the hell could I get out of this?"

"You're the off-worlder, or so you say." She snorted loudly. "Use your strange powers or whatever. I'll wait." Crossing her arms, she kept her eyes on him, unamused.

The young man grimaced, looking up at the lip of the gap again. His gut clenched, and he frowned. Did people not from this world really have some strange power? Did it apply to him as well? His lips thinned, mind racing. He reached upwards, glaring at the edge of the hole now. It was too far up for him to climb, but maybe...?

Nothing happened.

The woman with the skin the colour of dark chocolate rolled her eyes. "Or maybe you're just a human."

"I am human," he said with a scowl.

"Then there you have it."

"But I'm not from here," he continued, clutching the phone and showing it. "Where I come from there aren't any of these... ferals, monsters that look like women."

She waved her hand at him, turning to her side and leaning away. "You clearly come from a coddled up hole, I don't care."

Barry's mind exploded with a million insults, but not a word came to his lips. As if someone had cut the connection between his mind and his mouth,

the young man could only throw his hands down and slam against the earth beneath him. A suppressed cry came right after as the sudden gesture brought an incredible amount of pain out of both his legs. A deep whimpering breath followed, and Barry covered his mouth and shouted into his palm.

The woman all but ignored him, turning her back his way.

Panting, exhausted, and shivering, Barry lay down on the ground, staring up at the dark hole above. The screen on the phone was turned off. The world was plunged back into darkness. The only company was the stabbing pain that throbbed just above his ankles, like shards of glass had been embedded into his legs. Moving made him want to scream, but remaining still did not help any as his heartbeat alone was enough to send tiny prickling pain up his legs.

The young man figured he should try falling asleep- maybe that way the pain would go away. Maybe the dog would come for him and he just wouldn't wake up.

But the attempt was short-lived when he heard a soft whimper next to him. And just like that, he couldn't focus anymore. Barry waited a second in silence, then two, growing tense. Another soft whimper.

With the push of a button, the screen came back to life, and the hole was no longer so dark. His eyes shifted towards the third occupant of the whole. She was the monster that had soft brown wings for arms and was currently using them to cover her whole body and hide her face. Another soft whimper left her, and the young man hesitated.

After a pause, he glanced over at the dark-skinned one. She had turned her back to him. So he spun back to the feathered one and reached out. Slowly, he touched her feathers, making sure to be gentle.

A slight shriek followed as the girl recoiled away, shrinking and tightening into herself. Barry could only wonder- how large was she? The creature looked smaller than her wings might have otherwise suggested. "Shhhh..." He whispered, reaching into his left pocket and dragging out the crumpled wrapper with the leftover food from his last meal.

His stomach reminded him he'd not eaten for a while. How long had she been out? A sigh and a shake of his head. Barry opened it. Half a sandwich. "Hey," he called out to the creature, caressing her wing. It was covered in dirt, but it was so soft...

The creature flinched again, becoming very still when he caressed her wing again.

"Hey," he reached out, half a meal in his hand. Damp crushed bread and ham. Barry placed it down in front of her. With his focus turning downwards, he realized her feet were also not human. They were talons, covered in yellowish scales. They were sharp, each nail longer and thicker than his thumb.

His heart skipped a beat. This girl could gut him in an instant if she wanted. Quietly, he leaned away a bit, laying on his back again. Nibbling on his half of the meal, Barry could only fight against the fear that clutched his chest.

When the glow went out, the whimper returned.

Without a word, the human turned the light back on, his finger fiddling with the screen to avoid it from going out. His eyes flickered at the winged creature that remained so close to him, and then at the dark-skinned woman who kept so very still. What else could he say? What else could he do? The pain clouded his thoughts and shortened his breaths. The fear kept his gaze flickering back to those sharp talons on his neighbor.

And despite himself, he couldn't help but think of Mark and Veronica.

A spark of despair clenched his gut, piercing him through like a sword and hurting more than the throbbing legs. Tears came unbound to his eyes. Was he disgusting enough that someone would just throw him to his death like that? What had he done wrong?

The sound of ruffling startled him. He opened his eyes and glanced over at the monster. The sandwich half he'd left on the ground was gone. The creature had peeked at him over her wing, brilliant blue eyes peering at him with an angelic soft face that was full of crumbs and dirt. Her gaze moved

from him to his phone, then back to him. Her wings still remained tight, covering her body, but she'd relaxed.

Barry had forgotten to flick the screen. The light went out. A startled whine followed.

When he turned the light back on, the girl's eyes locked onto the screen and on him, her face unreadable other than the wide blue eyes.

The young human could only sigh, looking at her. "Hey."

She opened her mouth and a slight trill came out, a sharp little melody that bounced against the surrounding dirt. Then she closed her eyes and lowered her head. Her shoulders relaxed, and her head lowered back into her wings. Within minutes, she'd started breathing slowly.

It wouldn't take Barry much to fall asleep, either.

Chapter 045 [Barry]

Barry woke to his whole body being numb and cold. But the numbness didn't last, sensation started to come back, and with it pain. The dirt stabbed into his back like a hundred tiny jagged points that were attempting to push through his consciousness. But all of that became moot the moment he'd shifted. An explosion of agony swept through his mind. Red hot knives pushed their way through his swollen ankles and up to his knees. He jerked, and it was made all the worse, his arm covering his mouth to suppress the scream as the world became invisible flames that licked at his skin. It left a ringing inside his ears that snatched his thoughts away from him.

When his consciousness came back to him, Barry realized he was flat on the ground again, and a chilling sweat ran down his forehead and all over his body. Everything was cold, ice that pressed against him from all directions.

The young man's mind tumbled through his thoughts like falling down a cliff. Shaking hands reached for the phone, clicking it on with the press of a button. Light blinded him. His eyes took several seconds to adjust to the darkness. There might have been other sounds, but his shivering heartbeat deafened him to the world.

Something soft and warm touched his shoulder. He turned his gaze towards the blond monster, her blue eyes looking down at his own. Without his glasses, it was hard to see the details, but there was something in those blues that felt... warm.

Barry tried to move and whimpered from the pain. A half-choked sob.

The winged woman shifted, the light from the phone illuminating her as she... lay next to him? The young man's mind couldn't handle thoughts. They slurred and blurred before they made their way through. He was unable to make heads or tails of what was happening. Her wing reached out and covered his chest. Her head rested on his shoulder.

The light went out again, and all the human could sense was the creature's body as she lay her wings on him. Heat from her touch soothed the chill against his skin. The thundering heartbeat that pumped blood into his throbbing skull slowed. His ears cleared from the sound enough to realize she was humming. It was a soft whisper, barely a tune. It reverberated through her body and his own. It soothed the aching; it calmed his body.

The minutes bled by before Barry's body relented, calming down into a fugue of pain. The sound of the humming slowly drowning out the discomfort, leaving behind a soft warmth. There was a slow, distant pitter-patter of rain, barely reaching the human's ears.

Gasping, Barry's thoughts had slowed, moving through a molasses of delirium. With the phone providing light once more, he turned to look into the shining blues of the petite woman that clung to him. "Why?" He could only ask. His voice was hoarse, scratching at his throat like sandpaper.

Her only response was a little trill, and a little tilt of her head. Her cheek pressed against his shoulder, her eyes closed, and her hug tightened ever so slightly.

The young man couldn't summon the strength to move, let alone risk more pain. He laid there under her wing. His body was still cold, but the heat of her touch had stopped his body from trembling like a leaf at least.

"I don't..." A slight cough stopped his words, and his lips tightened ever so slightly, his eyes becoming damp again.

Shaking his head, the young man glanced to his other side, to the only other person in this hole that was filled with nothing but dirt, cold, and darkness. The tanned woman sat with her legs crossed. Her emerald eyes were peering at him, her expression unreadable.

"What?" the young human could only ask.

"You're going to die." There was no joy in those words, no threat, no anger—rather, it was a statement of fact.

The redhead closed his eyes tightly, hands clenching into fists, as the movement of the phone causing the shadows to dance around them. "I don't want to die."

"Without healing, you probably won't last more than a day or two." She was calm, looking at him for long, quiet seconds. Her eyes appeared weary, tired.

He choked back tears. "I don't want to die." She didn't answer. His mouth clenched tightly. "I don't want to die."

"When the Hound shows up again." Her voice came out as a whisper. "They will take you, since you're the weakest. They will eat you alive."

Barry sobbed, shaking his head. "I don't want to die, please."

Her green eyes hardened, a heartbeat of hesitation. "I... can help you."

"What?"

The words startled him and his eyes widened as he blinked back the tears.

Her eyes locked on his and her expression was grim. "I can put you to sleep, bring it to an end. No one deserves to go out like that, not even a human."

It was like a cold punch to his gut. The young man shook his head. "I don't... please, don't."

"It would be like falling asleep, painless," she said. Her voice was as if not her own. She had not blinked; she had not looked away. Her shoulders tightened as she said this, however, betraying the tension behind the calm.

The light in the phone went out and Barry quickly turned it back on, the shiver of his body bringing a throb of agony through his legs. No, this couldn't be it, not this. He shook his head with everything he could muster. "I don't... I don't want to die."

The dark skinned nameless woman didn't answer, closing her eyes and leaning against the dirt wall. She almost looked relieved, her arms slumping at her sides as she breathed in deeply and sighed. She turned upwards,

towards the blackness of the hole above and the nothingness that it led to. An abyss that loomed over their heads.

"Kajou."

"What?"

"My name, it's Kajou."

The redhead closed his eyes for an endless moment, letting out a hollow laugh. "Barry. That's my name." A strangled sob made its way out of his lips. "Not that it matters, I'm just... I'm just..." He didn't say anything else, feeling unable to utter the words.

A pressure on his shoulder made him turn his head down to the creature that'd been hugging him. Her sky-blue eyes met his. "Bahr-ee."

Her words brought a flush of warmth through him. Filled with concern and empathy, the young man's head swam. Barry nodded, feeling his eyes moisten again. "Yeah, I'm Barry," he choked back the words, the fear, the pain, and the cold.

"Bahr-ee," she chirped, smiling slightly wider, her wings tightening against him in a comforting embrace.

"What!?" The word came out of Kajou. It was harsh and surprised. Her eyes were wide and her mouth agape, as if what she'd seen was impossible. "Did she... did she just say your name?"

A howling noise cut Barry's attempt at asking what she meant. The sound bounced into the cave and all around them. Everyone tensed as it shook the walls, and it made the earth tremble as it grew in volume.

A voice ran out from the abyss above them, distant and filled with echoes, but clear. "KAJOU!"

The dark-skinned woman's head snapped upwards, the shock replaced with brilliance, a smile coming to her lips. "PAN!" She screamed back, loud, her voice a thunderclap that made Barry flinch. "PAN!"

"KAJOU! I'm coming for you!" The voice responded, and barks joined in with the howls from earlier. Something exploded, and the ground shook once more. There were whines and screams. "I'm coming for you!" Kajou shuddered as she heard this, smiling, her head glancing up at the hole's edge and then back down at Barry. Her smile died down, and her brows furrowed.

The feverish young man shuddered, lips tightening. "Guess that's your rescue."

Her frown tightened. "No, you're coming with us."

Chapter 046 [Barry]

Barry couldn't believe his ears. He was lying on the ground, panting for breath, as his whole body teetered on the edge of consciousness. Perhaps it was the delirium that had made him imagine what Kajou had said. The fever was causing his body to feel far too cold. The winged monster at his side kept looking at him with wide, blue eyes. She was hurt, too. Barry wasn't sure how he knew; he just knew there was pain in her arms, erm, wings.

"As soon as Pan deals with the ferals, I'll ask her to heal you." Kajou spoke the words with intent.

"I don't..." A long silence as a shriek was heard up above. What was happening?

"That wasn't her voice." Kajou let out a slight smirk, a deep sigh of relief following her proclamation. There was even a slight cocky grin on her lips. "Doubt any of the ferals will be able to stop her."

"KAJOU!"

The dark-skinned woman used her hands to louden her voice. "OVER HERE! IN THE HOLE!"

"I'M COMING FOR YOU!"

The other's voice was a loud roar, and another shudder made the earth vibrate all around them as if a hammer had come down upon it. This time it was closer, and for a split second, Barry could see a flash of yellow light up above. In that brief instant, he realized the abyss that'd been hanging above them had led to a cave of some sort, its ceiling so far up that his phone had not been able to illuminate it.

The blue-eyed girl at his side tightened, her face also turning upwards. She was nervous, afraid, her expression shifting as her gaze returned to him.

When the phone screen turned off, she let out a tiny squeak. "Bahr-ee," she whimpered.

"Hey, turn that thing back on." The light came back right as another thud bounced off of the walls. Several whines followed by a howl.

And then, silence.

"Kajou!" the voice from earlier rang out. It sounded winded- not as much of a roar. "Talk to me!"

"Over here you blind bat!"

"Oh, there's a li-" A head popped over the edge, looking down at the three of them. Gold hair framed the wild, unfocused look on the face of the woman with a terribly sharp gaze that focused on Barry instantly. The intensity of the gaze made his whole body drop a whole degree. "Kajou, do I need to kill someone?"

Kajou hastily spoke up. "No. We need some healing. How much juice do you have?"

"Enough. I offed their leader, sent those mutts packing, but they'll be back. Might try to track us down if we're not careful." The hazel eyes of the gold-haired woman lingered on the shivering young man for only a second further, as if to confirm he was indisposed, and then she jumped into the hole.

The winged girl at Barry's side shrieked and held on to him hard enough his bones creaked and ached. But past the pain and confusion, Barry could only gasp as pure, glowing white wings emerged from Pan's back. They spread just enough to cover the hole from one edge to the next, slowing down her descent. Heavy metal boots slammed against the dirt and a sword lingered in her right hand. Those sharp, distrusting eyes stared at the young man with a darkness that starkly contrasted with the woman's wings.

"Who's the human?"

The hunk of metal she wielded was almost over a meter long, and it should have been something far too large to be held with one hand. Yet in her grasp, it may as well have been no heavier than a feather.

"He's an off-worlder," Kajou declared in a rush. "We need him alive. He'll be dead if you don't heal him soon."

"And the girl?"

"A feral, a tamed feral."

"What do you mean 'tamed'?" Pan tightened on her sword, pointing at the winged blue-eyed creature with its tip. "She has no collar."

The nameless winged woman froze, lowering her head into his shoulder and whimpering.

"She said his name," the dark-skinned one proclaimed. "They barely spent the night together, and she said his name. Pan, the elder was right."

"Did you get your head conked or something?"

"Heal me first at least."

Pan turned to meet the other woman's gaze, her eyes moving downwards to Kajou's swollen red ankles. She scoffed. "I fucking told you to take guard rotation seriously." She knelt next to her as she spoke. She shifted the aim of her sword at Barry, but the other shifted to press against Kajou's ankles.

"I know. I didn't expect two Hounds. One caught me by surprise." A sigh of relief left her as Pan's left hand began to glow a dim yellow. "That's better."

"Don't fucking move until I'm done, or I'll have to break your ankles again so they can settle properly. That won't be fun for anyone."

"Who... what are you?" Barry could only pant in disbelief, his eyes traversing up the sword and to the armor-clad woman. The dull grey metal of her armor was stained with blood, but her blade was spotless. Her hair was drenched, her clothes soaked and her metal boots muddied, but her wings

were dry. Both sword and wings had an ephemeral glow to them. It was almost warm.

The woman's head snapped in his direction, hazel eyes glowing with power. "Speak again, human, and I will cut your tongue. You can live just fine without one."

"Pan-"

The woman's head whipped back to meet her partner's gaze in an intense glare. "Do not fight me on this, Kajou. We can't take risks."

"The elder gave her orders."

"He's still breathing."

An uncomfortable silence fell upon them. Barry remained still. The fever had made him start sweating, but the presence from this woman made heavy beads roll off his forehead. His mind kept trying to spin out of control, even as he fought to keep it still. He had to struggle against a slippery surface of panic, the adrenaline not helping any. His swollen ankles kept throbbing in pain, the stabbing sensation pushing his consciousness to the side to let instinct take hold.

A soft whimper brought his attention back to the winged girl that hugged him. She was scared out of her wits, paralyzed and clinging to him as if to dear life. She dared not look at the armored woman directly, instead attempting to press herself and Barry down into the dirt, to turn invisible and remain out of sight.

"There."

The proclamation was accompanied by Kajou being aided onto her feet. The dark-skinned woman grinned as she glanced at her ankles. The swelling was gone entirely. "Much better."

"How're your reserves?"

"I can kick a mutt."

"Great, snag the bird."

"Wai-!"

Barry's word was rewarded by a swift kick to the head. All too suddenly, the world was spinning and completely out of control. There was a ringing in his ears, loud enough to muffle whatever words the blond woman spoke next. He couldn't hear anything, but he could sense the winged girl that'd been hugging him, shrieking and fighting as Kajou yanked her off of him.

"BAHR-EE!"

The voice rang loudly inside his head, louder than everything else.

"BAHR-EE!"

She thrashed and kicked, and Kajou dug in her heels and pulled harder, fighting to remain balanced while the winged girl kept trying to break free. With a throbbing pain and blurry vision, Barry saw as the angel turned away from him and towards the feral girl.

Her sword rose, pointed at the creature. The sword began to glow brighter. "She's going to break free and put us all at risk. Keep still."

"Wait, NO!"

The voice was spoken by Kajou and Barry at the same time. The young human reached out towards the panicking blue-eyed winged girl. Kajou tried to move out of the way, to pull the feral outside the blond's reach. The blond was faster, a mere forward thrust covering the distance in the blink of an eye.

The world ground itself to a halt, steel meeting flesh. For a split second, it seemed as if an invisible force kept it at bay, a wall that gave pause to the sword's tip. The next moment, with the sound of something shattering, the sword pierced through, pushing forward one inch at a time and all at once. The chain of events had taken less than a second.

And the second afterwards, agony stabbed into the center of Barry's chest. It was fire that drew a line into his heart and out his back. His lungs and heart

felt as if they were about to burst into flames, a singular red hot searing fire that burnt his chest from the inside.

But he couldn't look away from the nameless woman's blue eyes. Their eyes were locked with each other, their breaths trapped in a tight constriction. Her mouth was partially open, but no sound came out. The light within those brilliant blues dimmed, losing focus, losing life. With a sickening yank, the sword was pulled from the girl's chest, steam rising from the wound and not a drop of blood.

The nameless woman fell to the ground with a thud that shook the universe. Her lips moved quietly, she uttered one last word before she became still.

And with her death, a void snapped into place, piercing through the delirious human's mind like a lance. Barry realized he was screaming with every fiber of his being.

The boot made everything go dark.

Chapter 047 [Alice]

To Alice and the other survivors, the rain was a blessing. They'd been inching dangerously close to running out of water, and the food was already on its last legs. They'd done their best to ration it, but that could only stretch things so far. The question over what would happen once they were fully dry haunted their every move.

"We have those weird berries." Alice glanced at the various colorful spheres that had been gathered from the exploration of the surrounding area.

"Do you figure they're edible?" Victor scowled, the fellow teacher glancing at the potential food. There were other questions in his mind however, she could see them floating right under the surface. Could their hope of rescue hold out against the inevitable truth that they were already going hungry? How long until they opted to leave the wounded behind?

Alice's thoughts turned away from the unspoken and towards the question that had been raised. The berries. There were mostly three types, one red and very small. It was rather easy to spot since it had a waxy shine to it. The second type was larger: a light green and looking close to a strawberry that had been plucked a bit too early, with tiny white freckles across its surface. The third was the one that Alice was the most hesitant of, a sky blue berry that felt... weird. The color was too vibrant, too sharp, electric. Almost as if to loudly proclaim no one would dare to eat it. The blue felt warm to her touch, a strange sensation that didn't seem to go away even when she dipped it into water.

"I hope we don't need to find out," Alice muttered under her breath, closing her eyes. The sound of rain as it hit the metal chassis of the wrecked bus was almost soothing. "Do you figure Rick and the others found help?"

"I... maybe." Victor's eyes turned distant, glancing into the dull dark forest and the cascading rain. "If we have to go into the woods alone, we won't make it."

"Why are you so sure?"

"The werewolves? The spider?" A slight shake of his head. "When we were looking around for berries, we..." With a momentary pause to confirm who might be listening in, he lowered his voice. "We saw more of the... things. A new kind."

The hairs on the back of Alice's neck stood on edge. "What did you see? What happened?"

"There were two of them, they were too far to see clearly. I think it's a different sort than the ones we've seen so far," Victor said. "They'd been on the upper branches of one of the trees, just... watching us."

"If it's just watching... that's definitely an improvement."

Victor shuddered, eyes becoming distant. "It sure didn't feel like it."

A bright flash of light was followed by some whimpers from within the bus. The bright burst of illumination had been sharp and abrupt. The rumble of thunder followed a second later loud, the source clearly not too far off. It echoed around them a second longer before it died out to the rain.

"That was close." Alice winced, her eyes catching something in the darkness of the forest outside the clearing. She squinted, she could've...

Another flash of light pierced the darkness. And all too fast it was as if an icy dagger had pierced through her chest. There, on one of the larger branches and looking down into the clearing. Something large and dark, something dangerous that struck at her primal desire to run for cover. It was the spider, the same one that had snatched one of the students.

"INTO THE BUS!" She shrieked, shoving Victor inside and following only a step behind.

The scream set everything into motion at the same time. Those outside guarding had not hesitated to turn towards the bus and run, and just as they had moved, so had the monster. Like death and its cloak, the black creature

jumped from the branch and soared, arching towards the clearing as if it could fly. The illusion was certainly sustained for a split second before gravity took over and the massive shadow arched through the air and landed on the man that had been closest to her side of the clearing when the alarm sang.

The monster opted to use the man to cushion her fall, two of its legs pushing against the center of his back. The human collapsed under the weight, the spider's legs punched clean through instantaneously. The sickening crunch was followed by a splatter of blood.

The man barely had a chance to register his own death.

The next flash of lightning came with the monster's brilliant bloody red eyes focused at the bus as everyone had scrambled inside. Silver locks of pearly white hair framed her sharp face and predatory smirk that had too many sharp teeth. The monster did not move as the humans hurried to block the entrance with the spare usable chairs. A cacophony of shrieks, whimpers, and shouts echoed inside the metal box.

Alice could not pay it any mind, her eyes glued on the monster and the look of smugness on those lips. As if what they were doing was exactly what it wanted them to do. The creature shifted its focus downwards to its most recent prey. The spider pulled its leg out of the corpse and grabbed it with its human-shaped hand. Turning around towards the forest, the monster left a trail of blood in its wake that mixed with the mud and rain.

"It's leaving...?"

As one, the group of survivors froze and stared, watching the monster climb the tree to the spot it had jumped from.

"No." The voice came from Ms. Dodson, the woman's wide eyes holding a cold icy darkness within them. There was an edge of panic and anger within them. "She's keeping us alive."

"What do you...?" Alice was about to ask, but stopped as she saw the monster sat its hulking spider body down and yanked up the body of the man

with the bright yellow bloodied shirt.

Slowly, the monster turned itself over, so it'd be laying on its back, all eight massive arachnid legs waving into the air. The arachnid torso twisted, and a thread of thick silk emerged from the bottom. The spider creature wasted no time to quickly spin around. She turned the body like a top, weaving more and more silk onto its frame, over and over until it was completely hidden and bound in the white substance. The creature latched the silken cocoon to the branch, leaving it hanging underneath.

"It wants to keep us alive." Mr. Dodson repeated herself.

"But why?"

"Because we'll eventually starve." Victor commented with a growl.

"Why would it do that?"

"She might be cautious, not wanting to take risks." He turned to the psychology teacher. "Remember how you scared off the werewolves? They ran because they didn't know we were all bluff. I bet it's the same situation here, why deal with a strong opponent when you can weaken them?"

"We all scared them off. Together." Alice's words came flatly.

"Who cares how they were scared? If that thing stays there we are all DEAD!" Ms. Dodson shrieked. Her wrinkled face was turned into a snarl, yellowed teeth shining bright, eyes shrunken and hidden between the folds of her facial age. "It could attack us too!"

"It might... when it gets hungry," Victor muttered under his breath, eyeing the branch and the monster that stood on it. "We should start thinking how to get out of here."

"And leave the wounded behind?" Alice's words were soft, but her eyes burned bright. There was fire in her eyes as she glared at Victor. That heat turned towards the rest of the bus, daring them to speak up on the matter. Unfortunately, there was one person willing to do so.

"We can't be dragged down to die like some animal!"

The younger woman stepped closer, looking into those cold uncaring eyes that stared back at her from the shorter woman. "If-"

"We can deliberate and think about our options calmly." Victor's hand squeezed Alice's shoulder, drawing her attention. "The monster's not attacking, that means we can use the time to reinforce the bus and prepare for the worst."

"And then what?"

The question cut through those gathered there like a guillotine.

"And then... we try to see what we can do," the man spoke with a grim nod that felt lacking determination. "We can hold out."

"Hold out to what?"

The question came from within the crowd, and it was no better than a hammer-blow to them all. The noise of rain hid the sound of their hope cracking a little further.

"To the others."

Alice straightened her back, staring at them with a look of grim determination. "Rick and the others went out to look for aid. I am certain they will find it if they haven't already. Help is on the way, I'm sure of it." She squeezed her hands. "All we have to do is hold out until it gets here."

Chapter 048 [Rick]

To Rick, sleep had been impossible. All throughout the night the sound of rushing water and the groans of the building as it kept shifting kept his nerves on edge. Whenever he closed his eyes, the sight of the rushing water pinning him against the house's outer wall pushed him back into wakefulness. But the vision was odd, not seen from his own eyes but from afar. It came with a panic and concern that didn't quite feel right. It was an anxiousness that was almost primal and that almost felt as if it wasn't his own.

The feelings kept his body on edge, his adrenaline thick in his veins, keeping the fight or flight instinct fresh and active without pause. Rick felt just about ready to jump away from the nearest shadow, out the square hole that was the window, and start swimming.

But he'd need to be far more suicidal to do that, so instead he spent the night just walking and using the flashlight from Tomas' phone to investigate the house. The structure quiet save for the creaks and groans from stress the current provided. A current that kept his shoes submerged even at the second floor.

The rise of the water had inched its way upwards over the hours, but at least it seemed the ascent had slowed. And yet, despite all odds, Tomas and Kat had found a chance to rest... somehow. It was hard to believe they'd managed to get a blink of sleep considering the raining had not abated, nor had the thunder. The two had found some tall flat furniture to lay on and that had been that.

Which suited Rick just fine, it let his mind wander and fuss over things on its own as he circled about and tried piecing together the life of whoever had lived here. The young teacher had only found one object worth mention while exploring the upper level of the household: a black leather collar. The item looked incredibly sturdy, with metal wire weaved into the material. It was also entirely devoid of a latch, and was a single piece of black that was about as wide as his thumb and as thick as his pinky. The most unnerving part

was how it tingled to the touch, as if it had a small current running through it. The sensation felt odd, wrong.

The piece of leather had been torn, snapped forcefully at some point in time, perhaps years ago.

"Whatchu found there, prof?"

A slight cough, as Rick realized he'd been staring at the thing, for how long? He wasn't too sure. "Just discovered this."

Kat smirked. "Someone either had a very large dog or was rather kinky." She put her hands on her hips. "It might look good with my cardigan."

"Don't." He flicked the item out of her reaching hand, and his gaze hardened. "This thing's been dumped here for who knows how long."

"Right, because our biggest concern is some old dusty piece of fetish gear." Her eyes twinkled as she leaned towards him, grinning from ear to ear.

"I'd rather we just not add tetanus to the pile of things to worry over." With a flick of his wrist, he tossed it out the window and into the raging river below. Better that than test his luck.

The house groaned- and for an instant, the floor felt like it had shifted one inch too many for comfort.

"Now you went and pissed off the river Goddess because you gave her a crappy piece of fetish gear." The woman rolled her eyes, nervously laughing as she glanced around, her right hand grasping her left elbow and rubbing it softly. "Do you... figure the house might fall? I've seen some vids of when that happens and it's crazy, they say that-"

"Kat. Please." Rick looked at her with a deep sigh. "Where's Tomas?"

"Still snoring."

The teacher leaned back against the wall. "You couldn't sleep?"

"He's a nice fuck, but doesn't really know how to squeeze the right way to make it comfortable to sleep." With her words, the teacher coughed, but it only made her smirk widen. "Hey, I figured you already knew."

"I'd guessed it was the case, but I was not looking for confirmation about it." He sighed and shook his head.

"Eh, thought I might as well not play coy about it." She shrugged nonchalantly, leaning against the wall opposite to his. "So since we're talking about it to try to distract ourselves from impending doom, how's the cat?"

"The... cat?"

"Monica." She wriggled her hips slightly. "She yowls a lot, so how's the wild pussy in the sack?"

The teacher shot her a flat unamused look. "None of your business."

"Prude."

Shaking his head, Rick closed his eyes. "Got anyone you want to go back to?"

"Mom. But both of us have always been somewhat free spirits in that sense. Gramps is the 'family values' guy."

"Father?"

"Dead." The answer came out dry and accompanied by a shrug.

Rick grimaced. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"Don't be, it was his fault." The young woman glanced downwards, shrugging her shoulders. "You got anyone waiting for you back home?"

"Loki."

"Unless you're talking about a DVD collection, I take it that's a pet." She arched a brow.

"Black cat, three years old and ready to claw my face out." The teacher sighed deeply. "I never was much of a cat person."

"How times change. First you didn't like cats and now you fucked one." The sophomore giggled, watching him fluster slightly. "If you're not a cat person, why the cat?"

"Wasn't my choice, I wanted a goldfish." His gaze turned towards her, brows lowered. "I'm guessing Loki's at least in a better state than we are."

"In heaven?"

This time it was his turn to chuckle. "Neighbor has my keys. She loves that little devil more than her own family."

"Oho, quite the ladies man."

"She's eighty."

"Age is only a number, just saying." She cackled at herself even as Rick was ever less amused.

A rumbling noise shook the house- thunder that reverberated from the floor and up through their very bones. Kat flinched and shrank, the smile gone fast enough to show it had been there only through force of will. The teacher looked at her and did his best to appear calm. "It's going to be alright. We'll make it through this."

Her eyes were glued to the water that was up to her calves. "I wish I could believe you."

Rick stared at her for a moment, reaching up to scratch his cheek. He wasn't sure what to say- how could he reassure her? Or at least help her focus herself back? Whatever the answer might have been, Kat chose to lean into a hug before he could decide. She buried her face into his chest and squeezing tightly.

With a grimace, the teacher quietly wrapped his arms around her shoulders. "I'm a terrible hugger, just a warning."

"I'm the one supposed to be doing the bad jokes." She held him tighter.

Looking down at that bed of wild dirty golden hair, Rick's gut tightened. He couldn't let himself fail here. The others were depending on them finding help, even these two students- they might be adults, but they'd barely stepped into that world. He almost had a decade at it and felt just as lost as the two sophomores did.

But he had to look the part of the bigger adult in the room.

The house shook again, the rumbling of thunder closer, far closer. Kat gasped and tightened her grip on him on instinct. The teacher patted her head and turned to stare out the window. There was another rumble, a colossal shudder that rattled the dust off the ceiling.

Alarms were starting to blare louder inside his mind. Something was wrong.

It took an instant to realize why. "There's no lightning."

"What?"

Rick let go of Kat. "Wake up Tomas, NOW!"

The look of confusion took just one second to vanish. She didn't hesitate, not sure what or why he'd said so; her feet turned, and she sprinted down the corridor as Rick took the opposite direction. He approached the window and shoved the half-torn wooden blinder off so he could glance outside.

Outside the storm raged on. Even when it was daytime, there was little light to be had. The sky was a dull dark grey, and the rain poured down with a vengeance. The river had grown, swallowing the whole farm and submerging it under muddied opaque water. Trees were dragged down the raging stream, rushing their way through, branches and pieces of debris from the less sturdy building pressed against the outer wall of the house.

There was a flash of lightning, and the rumble of thunder.

It was followed by more rumbling, louder, and deeper. It shook Rick's feet and made him feel like he was in the middle of a stampede. It was coming

closer. And it was with the feeling of his stomach dropping to the floor that the next bolt of lightning revealed the source.

Rick's body froze as he saw the large boulders rolling down the stream, some of them large enough to eclipse the building they were currently using as shelter.

The mountain was falling.

And it was coming their way.

Chapter 049 [Rick]

Rick looked upon the mountain as it fell. Thousands of tonnes of stone and dirt loosened by the flood and damp soil. Boulders the size of houses were following the stream. And their current location happened to be in their trajectory.

Even though it was early morning, there was barely enough light to make out the shifting terrain, the raging river, and the rolling boulders. Each one moved along the river as if it weighed less than a marble, but seeing how the trees were flattened in their wake, it was clear they were anything but an unstoppable force.

The rumbling was becoming louder, an earthquake that rose through their soles and rattled their bones. The floor was shaking with each thud of the spinning stones that were larger than the very structure they were standing on. And these gigantic stones were coming their way.

"What's going on!?"

The flash of lightning streaked through the sky above as Rick turned to the two students. They were holding hands in a death-grip. Their faces were slack, eyes wide and panicked. And they were looking at him. They were unsure of what to do, or where to go. They were scared.

In Rick's mind, Charlie screamed for help.

The knot tied inside his gut, and he turned to focus on the outside once more, up the hill, the incoming boulders, and the falling mountain. The house would be crushed, and them with it. Did they have a way out? What was the way out? His mind raced, how much time before it reached them?

They couldn't wait.

"We need to swim."

And the world became silent as the two of them looked at him.

Kat and Tomas then turned to glance at each other. The young man hesitated, initiating half a step that turned into a full one when the young woman moved to follow. Kat reached out and gripped Rick's hand. Her eyes reflected the lightning that roiled outside. "I trust you."

The teacher turned to look back outside, at the mountain, and at the river. The water level was not much lower than the window itself. The slush lapped against the building and the house groaned the closer the tremors were becoming. Even if the boulders missed, there was the question whether the house would collapse on its own, anyway.

"Fasten everything down!" Tomas spoke up in a near shout, quickly taking his backpack and hanging it so it would be in front of him rather than behind. "Also... also..." He was taking deep fast breaths. "Air, air, need air, in bags, floating."

"Tomas." Rick gripped his hand. "We don't have time." His eyes turned to Kat. "As soon as we are out, we swim AWAY from the stream, we have to avoid the rapids and get to shore."

She nodded, trembling.

Swallowing hard, Rick moved closer to the window and grasped their hands. "You two first, quickly!"

Tomas took the lead, hopping over the windowsill after a mere heartbeat. His grip on Rick's hand became iron tight as soon as he hit the water. It almost pulled the teacher over, but with Kat's help, he pulled Tomas closer and out of the water. "There's a strong current!" The young man warned, using his free hand to hold on to the windowsill. "Kat."

"Here goes nothing." Her laugh was almost a shrill shriek that turned into a full cry the moment she'd been out the window. "F-FUCK! C-COLD!"

With one hand holding Tomas and the other Kat, Rick did what he could to help them move to the left. Wanting to avoid the raging river that was roaring

down their right.

"RICK!"

The teacher looked up.

Just in time to see one of the smaller boulders crossing the space where a shed had once been. It bounced, taking air for a fraction of a second as it smashed into the side of the structure, punching through. A roar of water deafened them, the whole structure groaned and crumbled as if made of cards, twisting sideways towards the new hole that had been made on its side. With the drop of the building, the water rushed into the window- into the house through the window.

Rick's face became submerged instantly, his grip on Kat's and Tomas' hand like iron. For a fraction of a second he realized that they were being pulled down with him. If he didn't let go, he'd drag Tomas and Kat back into the building along with the rushing water.

So he did.

A muffled scream echoed around his ears; the world became dark as he was flung back into the house from the force of the current that was rushing in to fill out every available pocket of air within. Whirlwinds of mud slammed him against the walls, the ceiling, and the floor. The air was knocked out of Rick's lungs as his cry was muffled under the muddy turbulence. He was blinded; it was too dark, too opaque. The water kept rushing past and around him, flinging him from one side to the other as if he were a rag doll. He lost all sense of direction or location, no longer even able to determine where in the house he found himself in.

Was the structure being pulled down the stream? Was he trapped?

His hand desperately grasped at anything he could, sliding off the cement walls.

Rick's lungs burned, the taste of dirt choking out his mouth and throat.

There was a flash of dulled light, to his right. He had barely noticed. Rick kicked off of the chunk of cement and struggled to head to the light. The moment he'd detached himself from the whirlwind, he was slammed by a stream of faster water, accelerating him into what was undoubtedly the main stream of the river. He tumbled and spun, the world becoming dark again- he couldn't breathe.

"RICK!"

The voice pierced through his mind like a hot knife. He couldn't see, but the voice had come from somewhere. His arms flailed, trying to gain upwards momentum, but everything spun out of control. So hard... to think...

"RICK!"

Flinging his arms and legs, he found a spark, a moment of stability as he was accelerated further, the turbulence leveling him out. Rick swam towards the voice.

He pierced the surface. Rick gave a gasp for air that was choked by a wave of water that yanked him back down. He had to breathe, he had to breathe, he had to swim, but the current was too strong.

"RICK!"

Something punched through, the sound followed immediately by something hard that grasped at his chest. The current abruptly became worse as he was pulled out of the water. He deeply gasped for air and coughed, and with another wave, they sank.

They?

The force that had gripped him pulled harder. They spun, and for a fraction of a second, the world became still. The force that held onto him had grasped onto something solid, something that wasn't under the whims of the river's current.

Air, another deep gasp, and he was yanked and flung out. His body rolled against solid land, earth, stable. Rick's eyes were blurred, and his gut turned itself inside out as he vomited water with barely a second of pause. His mouth tasted mud. On his hands and knees, Rick could only cough and collapse. Every muscle in his body shook and trembled.

"Rick."

This time the voice was solid, outside of his head, and in his ears. The clawed hand gripped his shirt and dragged him away from the sound of the roaring river, a good ten meters before she dropped him.

Monica's blue-green eyes shone with concern as she looked at him. Her paw on his chest was tender. "Rick," she stated again, frowning, leaning down, and licking his face, his cheek, his lips, his nose, and his forehead. "Rick," she spoke once more. She was sodden, tired, drenched just as bad as he was.

"Monica." He said the word and relief washed over her; she pressed her nose against his forehead, her arms moving to wrap around him in a wet embrace. He could barely summon the strength to return the gesture.

Lightning crackled across the sky.

Tomas and Kat.

The teacher instantly found the strength to stand up, escaping Monica's hug. He was... near the raging river. Forest was at either side of it, though he was on the side with the bigger trees. The muddied water ran wild, a rampaging gargantuan snake that rolled its way downhill. Boulders tumbled in the flow's wake.

He couldn't recognize anything. Not a sign of the house, not a sign of the farm, not a sign of the barest scrap or clue of either of the sophomores.

"We... we need to find them."

He stepped towards the river, to get a better view, to-

The paw gripped his shirt and tugged him back.

Rick whirled to meet Monica's gaze. She was frowning. "Rick."

There was no joy in that word, it was a warning.

"No, Monica, I need to find them, I need to go to get help!"

"Rick." She pulled him back a step further, away from the river.

"I HAVE TO HELP THEM!" His voice rang out, his hands shivered. Rick glared at Monica. "I HAVE TO HELP THEM! I-."

Gripping his shirt, she shook him, first left, then right, and just as easily as she'd thrown him from side to side, she left him standing. He weighed nothing to her. "Rick."

Slowly, she shook her head.

And the world tumbled around him.

He had failed.

Chapter 050 [Mark]

Mark and Veronica had been forced to alter their course through the woods more than once due to the rain. Mud wasn't much of a concern when one could walk over the roots and barely touch the ground, but the moss and tree-bark had become slippery. The lack of sunlight had also made navigation harder. It had long since become impossible to determine if they were even heading in the same direction they once were. "Forward" was a relative term, and with each passing day, it became more meaningless for both of them.

Not that they cared. It was to either move or stay put and find out if they'd die or not. They gathered rain water with their clothes and squeezed them to fill out their bottles. And still hunger gnawed at their every step. Their only source of food was those strange purple fruits that grew in the strange bushes that were half in bloom and half bearing fruit at the same time. Mark tried to avoid them, but the hunger and Veronica's insistence always won out.

The young man had come to memorize every inch of Veronica's supple skin. Each bout of passion brought heat that would overwhelm them. Each time it was a delicious moment in time where all worries took the backseat, where all that mattered was the here and now. Where they only had one another and nothing else mattered.

It was a risky endeavor, though. They had to hide from the monsters multiple times, using the bushes and holes under the trees to stay out of sight and escape detection. The monsters were moving, something was driving them to traverse the forest. Alone or in groups, the scattered creatures were in quite a hurry.

It was an unnerving sight. Women that were not human, covered in dirt or moss, scurrying and doing their best to avoid being seen. Each one had parts of their anatomy that were inhuman. Feathers, fur, scales, some even with oddly colored skin and extra limbs. None paid the two humans any mind. They appeared too concerned with their attempt to move fast and quietly.

The thought hung heavy around them as they took another forgettable hole to rest.

"I think we should follow the same direction the monsters are." Veronica spoke with a hushed voice, seated next to him under the relative comfort of one particularly large root.

"Don't have anywhere else to go." Mark snorted and shook his head.
"Everyone else is dead, anyway." His words hung heavy, ringing hollow.

The young woman's eyes narrowed. In the darkness of the small cave, she leaned her naked body against his shoulder. "It's just us, now. I think we'll be able to make it."

"Mhm." Mark's gaze was fixated on the dirt in front of him, his focus distant, somewhere else. "We'll die in this cursed place."

"Doubtful."

The young man sighed, closing his eyes. "How sure are you of that?"

Her hand moved to touch the choker hanging loosely around her neck. "It can't all be woods and forest, I'm sure we'll get out of here." With a sigh, she grinned at him, cooing as she used her fingers, slowly stroking his chest. "Maybe we'll get to die in some plains or a lake. Personally, I'd rather die someplace with a nice view."

"We should get moving." He shrugged her off, pulling out his phone to illuminate the area around them so he could pick up his things. "Long day ahead."

She sighed. "Fine, I guess the rain is better than sharing a damp hole with bugs."

No sooner had Mark pulled out the phone that he yelped, dropping his phone, the device spewing sparks and sizzling angrily. "What the f-"

A blindingly bright flash of light streaked and exploded outside. The world became a raging white, a vengeful force against the shadows that blinded

them both.

BOOOOM

The sound rumbled and shook them down to their bones. Their ears burst into a loud ringing that scattered their thoughts to the four winds. Everything was spinning- their whole bodies had been jolted, and they were lying paralyzed on the ground. Mark's hand reached out to grasp Veronica's, but she rolled over towards the lip of the hole. Whatever had hit them had clearly not affected the young woman as strongly. Meanwhile, Mark was trying to use his body and failing. His insides were filled with sparks that jolted his muscles and left him flopping against the dirt.

By the time he'd managed to regain control, Veronica wasn't there anymore. He cursed, grabbing his things and stepping out of the hole half-naked while dragging his backpack and shirt in his hands.

Mark saw it then, a second flash of light that burst between the trees maybe a dozen or two meters away. Mark's eyes took a moment to adjust before he realized he was looking at more of those female monsters. One's body was coated in that strange sparkling light, and the other one had a greenish glow about her. They were both facing each other and snarling, sparks and light dancing between them.

Mark didn't care to stay to see the finer details. Finding out what would happen next could very well be the last thing he did. No, instead, he turned away and started running with everything he had. In the next flash of light, he spotted Veronica; the young woman had a good lead ahead of him, tumbling half-naked through the forest.

Weaving his way through the roots and trying his best to avoid slipping up, Mark spotted several other figures moving through the forest. More monsters, flying overhead and desperately flapping their way to do exactly as they were doing: escape the light show the other two were causing.

With his ears still ringing and the world having a white fuzz at the edges, Mark considered himself lucky as he spotted a groove in the forest. For a heartbeat he considered just leaving Veronica to her fate... He grit his teeth,

speeding up as best he could and catching up to her. "To the left!" he roared at her startled face. He grabbed her arm and maneuvered through the bushes to yank her in the direction of the groove.

Her surprise didn't last long. She followed without opposition. They both made their way towards the area with lighter forest. The trees were shrinking from the massive behemoths into something far more reasonable, bushes popping up more often, and more importantly- fewer roots to slip on.

They stopped only once they could not hear the sound of the clash anymore.

Panting for breath, Veronica had kept enough sense to guide them both to a depression on the ground. "I think there's a cave there we can hide in." She pointed past the bushes near the entrance of the hole.

With the rain still splashing down on them and their clothes being entirely drenched again, Mark wasn't going to complain. Especially if this new safe spot could be used until the coast was clear.

Veronica's guess had been right. There was a cave there, slightly deeper than either expected, but nothing seemed to be moving in the darkness and out of the light drizzle of rain.

The instant they'd dropped their bags, Mark whirled on the young woman. "What the fuck was that about?"

"What do you mean?" She pulled off her shirt and pants, squeezing them dry and doing her best to do the same with her long hair.

"You dropped me like a sack of shit."

"You're faster than me. What gives?" Veronica pulled out her phone. "Huh, not dead. Good thing I had it off."

"Don't brush me off like that." Mark leaned in, grabbing her arm and scowling.

Veronica winced. "You're hurting me."

His fingers let go instantly. She stepped back, shooting him a glare. "Look, we had to run, I ran, I thought you were right behind me."

"Bullshit."

"I don't care if you don't believe me. We both know we need each other to survive." The young woman rolled her eyes, flicking on the light of her device.

"Well, you better start acting like it, bec-"

"Mark."

"Are you seriously going to-?"

"Mark!" Veronica pointed deeper into the cave, into the now illuminated shadows. "Look."

With a snort, he rolled his eyes and glanced in the direction she'd been looking at. His breath left him as all too suddenly he wasn't sure if he could trust his senses anymore.

There, embedded in the deepest wall of the cave, was a door.

Chapter 051 [Mark]

Mark, in the middle of a monster-infested forest, surrounded by what was effectively a death-sentence, was staring at technology. Not just any technology, evidence that there were other people out there, maybe even civilization.

Because right in front of him, there was a door.

"What the fuck?" He shared a glance with Veronica as they approached, her phone providing the illumination needed to avoid tripping on their way further into the cave.

The flat piece of furniture was embedded into the cave wall. It was made out of dark wood, simple and flat, with no decorations or grooves. It would've been easier to call it a plank if not because there was a wooden handle on the side. Mark reached out and twisted it, pulling the door open.

"Well, it's not Narnia," Veronica spoke with a dry chuckle.

On the other side, there was a short corridor, made out of compacted earth. There were also wooden beams every two meters, clearly meant to keep it all standing. It almost looked like an incomplete mineshaft that was only a dozen meters long or so. And within this tunnel, there was one thing that stood out above all else.

A big metal door. The second door they'd witnessed today.

Unlike the wooden plank they'd just stepped through, this door was intricately made. Whatever material it was made out of, it was a light bluish hue. Most surprisingly was how the surface was covered in little runes and symbols that Mark was quite sure he had never seen before in his life. "Do you know what these are?"

"Not a clue." Veronica's eyes were wide as she leaned forward, fingers caressing the surface. "Huh, it tingles."

Mark arched a brow, but did not move to touch the door. The last thing he needed was some surprise. So he shifted his attention to figuring out how to open it. There was a handle on the side. Wrapping his hand in cloth, he reached out and squeezed, trying to yank and then to push. But no luck.

Veronica laughed bitterly. "Go figure that the first sign of civilization we find is a locked door we can't open."

"Maybe it needs a riddle to open," Mark muttered, scratching the back of his head. "Like those fantasy doors or whatever."

"Never took you for being someone that read fantasy."

"I didn't. That was..." A slight drop of his shoulders as he sighed, eyes feeling heavy all of a sudden. "... That was Barry."

"Well, whatever, he's not here, we are." She pressed her palm against the metal, moving it up and down over the runes. "If this shit is locked, then that must mean there's something of worth behind it." With a short laugh, she traced several of the runes with her fingers. "Maybe some old dusty books and a rusty sword."

"I think the place isn't as unused as you think it is."

Mark followed his words by pointing at the ground. There were footprints in the dirt, moving in and out, and through the area the door occupied. Clearly, someone had been there and not that long ago.

"Oh shit, you're right." The young woman rapidly crouched to get closer. "These look like girl feet."

"You can tell?"

"I worked in a shoe store. These are girl shoes. Shit soles tho," she muttered, rubbing her choker for a moment. "I think we should stick around and wait for whomever went through here."

He grimaced at the suggestion. Was this a good idea? Could they trust whomever was going to show up would help? "I'm not too sure."

"Do we have a better alternative?" Veronica arched a brow. "We're lost in the woods, we don't have a clue where civilization is, and I doubt we'll be able to track these out there with the torrential rain."

"We can't stick around forever."

It was as close to a concession as he was going to give, and judging by the way she looked at him, she seemed aware of it. So, with a sigh and a nod, she tossed her baggage next to the metal door. "Well, might as well get comfortable." Veronica promptly ignored him. She opened her bag and pulled out her drenched clothes. She did her best to hang them from the beams on the low ceiling in an effort to get them dried up.

She proceeded to remove her clothes as well, going down to her underwear. Mark would have blushed if he wasn't keenly aware of her every inch by now. The glow of the phone screen was the only source of light they had, and it cast her in a white light that made her skin all the paler.

"Like what you see?" She let out a bark of laughter, doing her best to dry her skin with her hands. But her touches slowed down as she noticed his attention upon her, turning into simple caresses.

And then a long shiver. She grumbled, lowering her head and sighing. "Fuck."

"Cold?" Mark wondered with amusement.

"You'll be too if you don't strip off of that drenched thing." She gestured at the only thing he wore, his pants. "At least getting dry will help me stop shivering."

She was right, he knew. Staying drenched would end up with him being colder than if he were naked but not wet. So with a sigh, off his pants and shoes went. The socks followed, and soon enough, everything he had was left hanging from the wooden beams to drip and dry. It was the better option under the current circumstances.

Veronica didn't miss a beat, moving in and removing her underwear as well, only the choker remaining right as she turned off the light from the phone. In

the absolute dark around them, she stepped into his embrace. Her skin was ice, and it was hard to miss the shivering. His arms moved to wrap her into a hug as she held herself against him. "This sucks a lot less."

"Yeah..." He didn't know what else to say.

They stood there, in the dark, naked and cold, but at least not as wet. Mark awkwardly fumbled a little to adjust his position, and Veronica nudged him forward. Her ankle hooked against his, and they fell. The young man groaned from the impact. The woman straddled his hips but kept herself tightly in his embrace. "Happy?" He asked with a bitter growl.

"Just add some candles and a towel and I will be."

The eye-roll went unnoticed in the dark. "Why do you keep doing that?"

"The teasing and sneering and little dumb remarks?" Her shoulders shrugged against his own. "Mostly to distract myself from the loss of a friend. Also works as a distraction from the looming reality that we might die in a shit-hole."

"Now try the answer that's not from a textbook."

"It wasn't, you jackass."

"It's hard to tell with you."

"Yes, because you're a blunt guy who's thicker than cement and duller than a brick." Snorting, she placed her hand on his chest. "Look, short of it is that I want to fuck for once without needing that stupid fruity Viagra."

"Why?"

"Because reasons." She slapped his shoulder. "It's not like I'm going to record it and upload it as revenge porn or anything."

"... I doubt I'd be able to stop you, anyway."

"How generous of you. Now grab my ass with those warm hands of yours. I'm cold."

She leaned forward, kissing him, softly and tentatively. Even her lips were cool, her touch pushing warmth within him. Mark obliged with her request, and indeed, her bare ass was as icy as she'd promised, but his kneading quickly solved that particular issue. She molded herself into him, stealing his warmth for her own, and igniting the flame in his body.

The day was long and dark, and the night longer still. Their time together grew more intense when they ate the purple fruit to get themselves something to quell the hunger. Every couple of hours, they would approach the lip of the cave and look outside. The deluge had not stopped, but it had slowed. In the darkness within the cave, their bodies became drawn to one another as the familiarity of their hands against each other slowly became ever bolder.

And after what might as well have been an eternity in this intermittent darkness, their supplies dwindled out and their energy felt as if it was following on that trend. The fruit had strangely enough kept them energetic even if hungry, but after two days of this back and forth, half-naked most of the time, and fully naked the rest... they were reaching the limit, they would have to head out to look for food again.

And on the morning of the third day, there was a knock at the door.

Chapter 052 [Mark]

Mark and Veronica shared a worried look, their faces dimly lit by the young woman's mobile phone. In the harsh surrounding darkness of the cave, they could only hesitantly pause. For a long second, they pretended as if they'd heard nothing at all. Had it been a figment of their imagination?

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Another knock, exactly as it had been before. Clearly not imagined.

"Anyone there?" Mark asked, watching Veronica's eyes widen as she quickly turned towards the wooden door, shoulders tense.

"Yes," a male voice replied. There was a pause. "Did you get lost in the woods?"

Veronica glared at Mark, and seeing his shrug, she turned towards the door. "Will you open the door?"

"Not feeling very tempted currently," the man on the other side said. "I can smell the sex from over here. I'd rather not choke during introductions." A small pause. "Quick question, my girl over here can be a little fidgety at times, doesn't like crowds much. Could you come out with only one girl?"

"One... girl?" Mark and Veronica glanced at one another. He frowned as she made a show to stare around the cave. She gestured at him to continue talking. "Well, I mean, there's just the one here, so..."

"Oh, great. Then we'll wait here when you're ready. No rush, it's not like we're exposed to a possible feral popping in or anything."

Veronica frowned but nodded, moving to reach into her backpack and pulling out the can of spray paint. Her eyes narrowed as she took out her lighter with her other hand, holding them close to one another. Mark scowled and shook his head vigorously. A little spritz of fire was going to help them with exactly

nothing at all. Not even as a bluff. If these strangers were armed... He reached into the backpack and pulled out the gun. It didn't have bullets, but... maybe it could work as a bluff.

Into his pocket it went, its weight an almost comforting one as he moved towards the door, Veronica close behind. He pointed for her to put away the paint, to which she shook her head. There was a heated, wordless discussion. Mark gave up. "Well, we're coming out."

Using his free hand, he nudged the door open. But there was only darkness on the other side. Mark very suddenly realized he couldn't see anything at all.

The moment he'd stepped through, a hand reached out from the shadows and shoved him to the side. It sent his body tumbling into the ground. The unnatural blackness broke, light returning immediately after. Mark barely caught a glimpse of fire and the noise of pressurized paint before he was pinned face-down to the ground.

The male's voice from earlier spoke coldly. "Kill her."

"No you don't, b-"

Veronica's words had been mixed with the distinct sound of the spray can going off and a burst of flame. Then she shrieked, and all sounds came to a very sudden stop. There was the metallic clink of the can falling to the ground, closely followed by the lighter. But not one more noise.

Silence.

Then... the sound of droplets. Not from the rain outside, but from within the tunnel.

"Yuck!" a new voice spoke. Mark couldn't see, as he was being held against the dirt. But he heard a wet thud following the proclamation. "She was human. What the fuck? Noah, what the fuck!?"

"What do you mean, human?"

"Maidens don't go down that fast, you numb-skull. She. Was. Human. I killed a fucking female human. Fuck, the boss is going to be so pissed at me. Why the fuck did you tell me to kill her!?"

"How should I know she was human? Don't dump this shit on my lap."

"Fuck you, Noah, you gave the order. If the Boss asks, that's the fucking truth."

"No you don't, no one's telling him shit, just... just dump the body out for the ferals or something," the man growled. "How do you get two humans alone out here in the boonies, anyway? They should be dead. Inspect their stuff."

"What did you do to her!?" Mark growled, trying to fight against the grip of steel that was preventing his head from moving at all. His arms flung to fight off the attacker.

A groan escaped him as they knelt on his back, one hand reaching out and pulling the firearm from his grip. "Noah, this one has a gun." The attacker paused. There was a click. "No bullets."

"A gun? What type?"

"Standard revolver, smells like gunpowder and lead."

"Boss is going to kill me if it turns out this shithead is one of ours. Who'd be shitty enough to send one without giving a call?"

"Hey!" Mark roared, even as his nose was kept firmly against the dirt. "What the fuck did you do to her?" He took in a deep breath. "Veronica!"

There was a sigh. "She's dead, sorry about that." The tone was dismissive, almost annoyed. "Real grand mess killing a human woman like that. We have principles, you know?"

The heartbeat of silence brought the feeling of his stomach dropping straight through a pit. "You fucker, you fucker, what the fuck is wrong with you. I will fuck you up!"

"I said sorry, didn't I? You... Shery, would you get him up? I don't like talking to the back of a head."

With the same incredible force that had knocked him down, the hand holding his arm tightly against his back had him stand up just as easily. Mark's eyes immediately turned towards the open door he'd come through. There lied Veronica.

She was on her back, her body still. Too still. He couldn't see what had happened. The angle blocked his view past her knees, but he noticed the blood pooling around her ankles.

Bile rose up from Mark's throat. He turned away. "Fucking hell." He swallowed it down, the cold dread mixing with anger. He clenched his teeth and turned towards the two that stood in front of him.

A male and a woman. The male wore a drenched leather trench coat of some sort. He was looking away from Mark, and had a bed of gray hair and pale skin. "Brye, clean that mess, will you? I don't want the smell to attract any ferals."

The man gestured at the body, glaring at the woman.

It took Mark a heartbeat to realize she was not human. "You said to kill her." She stood like a predator, a slight forward slouch. Her eyes were gold and pierced right through Mark. She wore a black leather collar and an oversized brown shirt. Atop her head were two triangular black ears, aimed squarely at the trench-coat wearing human.

"And you didn't check," Noah replied.

"How was I supposed to check? I saw some fire shit. I had a split second to decide if she was going to roast me or not. You gave the order. I carried through."

"And the Boss won't hear about this because he'd have our heads on a plate. Just get a fucking move on, we don't have all day here." The male turned around to look at Mark right as he'd said this. One of his eyes was missing,

and a deep burn covered the left side of his face. Noah smirked. "Wow, not even a flinch."

"Fuck your ugly ass face," Mark growled.

"If your girl were alive, we might have talked things through, but that's just bad luck. Anyway, let's cut this short." Noah stepped forward, reaching into his coat and pulling out a black piece of glass, spherical in form and the size of a baseball. The man held it in front of Mark's face for a long second. There was a short laugh. "Yes, this is what you think it is. Now, you tell me what I want to know, and I'll let you go back into the forest along whatever way you came from."

He spat at him. "Up yours."

"Brave. Brye?"

"No comms in here, no weapons, no stones, no nothing. This shit is too weird. They can't have made it all the way from Sinco unprotected like this."

"You heard the gal, I want some answers." Noah grinned widely, leaning closer. "How did you get here? Who brought you? Do you have backup?"

"You should get the other half of that face roasted, it'd be an improvement." Mark glowered.

The man sighed. "Well, whatever, it's always easier to dispose of idiots."

Noah stepped forward. Mark struggled, but he might as well have attempted to bend steel with sheer force of will. The one keeping him held in place did not budge an inch. His eyes widened as he looked at that black sphere. Whatever it was, it was not good news. Especially if Noah's smirk was so wide.

But he couldn't escape. His arms were gripped too firmly by the woman behind him.

He didn't get the time to think of something else to attempt. The man stepped closer and pressed the sphere against his chest. It was cold and hard. Firm.

Mark held his breath, flinching. He expected pain, or worse. Whatever this thing was, its purpose was not friendly. Maybe some sort of shock device?

A moment passed, then another. He opened his eyes to look down at the blackened item.

It was still there, pressed against him, having done... nothing?

Mark realized the man was equally surprised at the turn of non-events.

"It... failed?" Noah muttered, eyes widening.

The young redhead lunged forward. His arms might have been held firmly, but he still had enough room to smash his head against the man's nose. A trajectory of inertia that ended against Noah's face that lasted only a split second. The effect was immediate. With a grunt and a crack, Noah stepped back, reaching for his face as blood spurted out. "Stupid little shit," he grunted, wiping the nose and glaring.

The glare turned into a look of terror as he saw he had dropped the black sphere.

And Mark had kicked it his way.

It took Noah a split second as he tried to lunge out of the way, not even considering blocking it somehow. But he was not fast enough. The ebony spherical piece of glass hit against his shin. The man shrieked as the sphere split in two, and purple and red light bathed his body. The scream became louder, a shrill cry for help. The man's body began to glow in a deep pink light, the glow spreading over every inch. The formless light dissolved instantly, being pulled towards the black object.

Noah clawed at the dirt, desperately trying to stop the inevitable. But the light was spreading fast, faster than he could move. His legs were gone within half a second, barely a heartbeat, and the next it was reaching up his torso. The light intensified as his scream died out, only light remaining behind, clawing hands sinking into the dirt before they lost all ability to keep

purchase, enveloped in the blinding glow and flung into the shining purple light within the sphere.

The scream came to an abrupt end as the glass orb clicked shut.

A deathly silence fell.

"No fucking way," the woman holding him whispered, faltering.

The grip keeping him in place loosened ever so slightly. It was enough for Mark to quickly pull himself free and stumble forward. He gave the black spherical thing a wide berth to avoid so much as risk touching it while moving fast towards the cave entrance. His steps were uneven as he moved, feeling out of balance. He looked over his shoulder at the woman who'd held him in place.

She had dull gray skin and a buzz cut of brown hair. Her face was slack, eyes wide, and her fingers were reaching up to touch the leather collar around her neck. There was a slight shimmer in the black leather. "I'm..." Tears ran down her face, but there was a slight smile.

Brye stepped out of the tunnel, holding onto the ankle of Veronica's body and stopping as she saw the scene arrayed before her.

Her eyes flickered from Mark to the other woman, and then to the black glass sphere.

Eyes widening, she dropped the corpse.

"Well shit." Her eyes moved to the other woman. "We need the human, Shery."

"Wh-?"

"Priorities, we're going to go feral if we let him get away." Those golden eyes turned towards Mark. Deathly focus. "I'll let you play with the new toy after that. Deal?"

The woman named Shery touched her choker, nodding. "Deal."

Mark turned and ran.

He didn't make it very far.

Chapter 053 [Rick]

Rick was trapped in Monica's arms, carried as if he were a bride, and entirely unable to escape. There was little he could do but stick to the ride. The rain buffeted them as she crossed the forest at dizzying speed, each step a lurching acceleration that made his stomach twist into knots. The most jarring part was the realization that she was holding back. Once she'd attempted to move faster, but everything within Rick's body screamed in complaint.

Wordlessly, Monica adjusted how she moved, being more careful.

And yet, even then, distances that would've taken Rick hours she crossed in minutes, slippery roots or muddy ground weren't even an inconvenience. Her claws sank into tree bark and found purchase with every step. She straight up didn't need to touch the ground. The branches and canopy of the overgrown forest provided her with everything she needed to move, unperturbed.

Sometimes she would detour for some unknown reason; other times she'd stop, clench Rick against her expansive chest and roar, waiting for several minutes before moving again. Her eyes were constantly staring above into the stormy clouds, and something about it was making her nervous.

Whatever was going on, Monica had made sure they did not stumble onto anything else.

And all the while, the young teacher was little more than a passive passenger. It was as if he weighed nothing on her.

Rick had thought about making Monica turn around. But how? And to do what? The river was too wide for her to safely cross. Even then, it was abundantly clear it would be a cold day in hell before she'd let him search for some spot further up or down that might let them try. He'd fought, he'd dragged his feet, and he'd tried to run.

The feline had only needed to not let go, and that was that.

She wasn't going to let him even try.

And he knew why; he sensed it oozing from her every move, the concern that burned within her. It made her tighten her grip on him with every bounce, and slow down before every curve. It was why she'd stop and stare at the sky as she hid under the trees from time to time. Each time she'd wait under a branch, she would look down at Rick, blue-green eyes wide and pained. She'd nuzzle her face against his chest, her ears batting against his chin.

Little consolation, in the end.

Tomas and Kat were dead, and he wasn't even sure how he'd manage to get to civilization. His mind listlessly went through the motions. Monica was unlikely to let him leave until whatever was making her nervous was gone, he'd have to go back to the farm once the flooding was over. How long would that be? A week? Two? Could he survive that long? Perhaps. He was certain Monica would help in some way.

But everyone in the bus would not be able to last that long.

That meant his only option was to return to them. Tell them about everything, try to convince them to come.

How many more would die because of him? Their food must be running out, would they even be able to make the trip to the abandoned farm? His gut wrenched at the thought, he wanted to scream, he wanted to-

"Rick?"

Monica spoke the word, her arms hugged him tightly against her chest. The woman frowned weakly, pulling him up and licking his cheek. The human could only nod a little and look away.

Night was falling, they were drenched, and he was getting cold.

Rick caught sight of the cave, Monica's cave, a warm light flickered from inside, a fire. The young teacher couldn't process things in time, Monica had moved straight towards it without so much as a sound.

Mr. Gabriel and the mouse both were startled, the small woman leapt and clenched herself against the older man, hiding behind him with a shriek. Monica cared little for either, dropping Rick to the ground and moving him closer to the fire. She lay behind him, wrapping his body tightly in a hug to cover for the side that wasn't exposed to the warmth of the flames.

The older man sat up, eyes brightening before a suspicious frown followed. "Where is...?"

Trapped between Monica's arms, shuddering, Rick met the old man's gaze, and slowly shook his head.

Silence fell in the cave, and Mr. Gabriel sat down. The frown deepening.

There was the slightest crease to his brows, the older man's focus shifted down to the flickering flames. "I see." A long silence followed, and his wrinkled hands tightened around the stick he'd been using to move the wood in the fire. "I'd suggest removing those wet clothes, before you catch pneumonia."

The human nodded and limply moved to comply, Monica appeared to guess at his intent and loosened her grip enough for him to wriggle out of his shorts and shirt. "Rick," she said, tugging his half-naked body against hers once more and using her wet arms to squeeze him close. Despite her drenched status, Monica was warm, her body seemed to have its own inner furnace. The fire Mr. Gabriel had made being equally helpful.

The older male wouldn't turn away from the flames, his focus distant and cold. "How?" He finally spoke, not having moved from his spot.

"Flash flood, we tried to escape, got trapped in an abandoned house. It collapsed."

With a slow deep shuddering breath, the man nodded numbly. "Did you see a body?"

"... no. The river likely took them."

The barest of shivers went through Mr. Gabriel; he closed his eyes and sighed. There was the barest constraint at the corners of his eyes, his hand slowly moving down and caressing the tail of the mouse woman that still hid behind him and away from Monica.

No more words were spoken that night.

Mr. Gabriel kept the fire lit throughout the night, the pile of sticks and branches that lay next to him slowly dwindling with every passing hour. Rick couldn't bring himself to sleep, despite the exhaustion, his mind refused to rest. The teacher kept glancing at Mr. Gabriel as the older man's focus barely left the fire.

"Mati always did joke I'd outlive everyone." The older man spoke, breaking the silence. He'd not turned towards Rick, the words appearing meant more for himself than anyone. A strain in the corner of his eyes and a tightness in the man's throat.

Rick wanted to speak, to apologize, to say something. He did not find the strength.

"Ga."

The voice startled them both, Mr. Gabriel glanced at the mouse woman. She was looking up at him with those wide eyes, her hands clenching his arm tightly.

"Don't worry, little one." He patted her head, soothing her to lay against his lap. "I'm not going anywhere."

The hours bled by, both men quietly lay in the darkness, the fire crackling between them. Not another word was spoken, the only sound the rain outside, the crackling flames, and Monica's light snores.

It would not be until morning that the lull would be disturbed.

Chapter 054 [Rick]

Rick had barely slept that night, short bouts of rest that felt like he'd only blinked. By the time he realized the surrounding light was shifting, it was with the first rays of sunlight piercing down against the lip of the cave. What little sleep there had been, it'd been restless and cold. The storm still raged on, the water bringing a chill into the cave, the only solace the dry spot around the fire.

What little sense of drowsiness there was ended when Monica leapt to her feet and growled. Very suddenly alarm bells rung inside Rick's head, everyone scrambled to move as the feline had practically shot out of the cave like a rocket without so much as a warning.

"Shit, it's White Claw! Out of the way!"

Mr. Gabriel and Rick froze, looking at each other with wide eyes. The voice had come from outside, startled and followed by a roar from Monica. Rick barely had the time to pull on his pants, stumbling outside into the rain.

Thunder crackled overhead, the rumble running down the mountainside.

He couldn't believe what he was seeing.

There were at least a dozen women there. Clothed women. But his mind caught up a moment later, noticing that they were no more human than Monica. They were monsters, some of them had wings, others had subtler tells such as claws, fur, scales. Each one of them wore a dark green uniform, a skirt, a vest, and a collar. Some only the skirt and collar.

More worryingly, Rick noticed a handful of them were armed with blades, staffs, and shields.

And Monica was fighting them.

Though... fighting would be the wrong term.

The feline was moving between the trees like a pinball. The group of women were rushing towards the trees, trying to adjust their relative positions to one another. The intent was clear, they were trying to obstruct her movements. The uniformed strangers moved in trios, as if attempting to anticipate where the feline might attack. "I can't get a good bead on her!"

"Ma'am, the humans! Two males and a mouse!" The one to speak up was a woman that had wings rather than arms, a harpy. She was floating high overhead the forest, her focus having turned towards Rick and Mr. Gabriel.

One of the fighters that floated nearer to the groups in the ground snapped her attention towards them. Her white wings glowed softly, an angel that wore armor and wielded a sword and shield. "We've come to rescue you, quickly, you mu-"

"RICK!"

The shout came from the forest, and it was followed by Monica exploding through the formation, barreling through a woman wearing a robe and moving in a straight line towards the cave. As one, the rest of the women moved away from her path and let loose a veritable rainbow of luminous power. Some were red, others blue, a few yellow or purple.

And all Monica did was twist midair, using the woman she'd impacted against as a shield against half of the incoming attacks. The other half hit her back, Monica winced in agony, but did not slow down.

She was heading straight for Rick.

The angel lunged downwards, moving to intercept the incoming feline, raising her shield. "Evac the humans, now!"

"Yes, Ma'am!" The two harpies replied and changed course, diving towards Rick and Mr. Gabriel.

Monica slammed claws-first into the angel and her shield. Whatever the angel had been expecting to happen next, she had not anticipated Monica twisting herself into a ball and placing her feet against the shield. And then

use the shield as a springboard. It was a split second, and the glare she'd shot at the angel shifted upwards. And towards one of the harpies.

The kick-back shoved the angel downwards, into the ground, and Monica flew upwards as if she'd been shot out of a canon. The roar the feline let loose shook the air, her claws open and thirsty for blood.

"Steva!"

The harpy had flinched from the roar, she did not react fast enough. Monica slammed against her. Both of them rose five more meters, and the harpy shrieked in pain. A spray of blood followed, raining down and mixing with the water from the storm. It took Rick a moment to realize the feline had ripped off one of the monster's wings and was trying to finish the job but had to disengage the moment the harpy kept kicking at her with those razor sharp talons. With a kick, Monica threw the harpy away from herself as they both fell to the ground.

The harpy struck the ground like a rock. She did not move from where she'd impacted the mud. Unlike her, Monica had fallen like a coiled spring, claws sank into stone, the rock that had been her landing spot exploded as she narrowly avoided a second incoming volley of attacks.

"Humans!" The angel cried out, mud dripping from her uniform, wings spreading wide as she raised her shield. "Get somewhere safe, we can't evacuate you while that feral's loose! Call for backup!"

With the order given, the other harpy quickly flew off, vanishing within seconds.

The angel flew straight towards Monica, a shining white light covering her body as she raised her shield. The glow reflected and refracted against the falling rain, turning her into a prism that illuminated the world around her like a lightning bolt. The woman let out a fearsome battle cry, challenging her foe to battle.

And Monica promptly ignored her, diving back into the forest, only seeming to accelerate further now that she had the trees to assist her movements. Each

leap left behind a blast of splintered bark in her wake, the woman remaining on the move as she was clearly intent on making herself as hard a target to hit as she could.

Before any of them could seek to hinder her movements, Monica altered her trajectory, making a beeline towards the ones that were attempting to shoot her down with their ranged attacks.

Monica narrowed the gap fast. "Defensive pos-"

The redhead that shouted the order didn't get to finish it as she had to dive for cover. It took Rick a moment to spot why, the rain had obscured it, but when he saw a splash of water behind the red-head, he realized she had very narrowly avoided a rock that had been thrown her way. By the time the woman had recovered her balance, Monica was upon them.

With a flash of light, a sphere of flames shot out of the red-head's hand. It hit Monica squarely in the chest.

But it failed to stop her. Rick winced as heat washed over him, but unable to look away as Monica's claws sank into the redhead's thigh. Bloody strips were carved out, leaving the woman to cry out and launch a second ball of fire. It missed, Monica rolled out of the way and into one of the fellow fighters that were attempting to get out of the way.

"She has San!"

Indeed she had. Monica had crouched low, grabbed the woman by the ankle and swung her around over her head and straight into a second one. Both improvised weapon and target cried out, tumbling and falling, neither quite able to get back up fast enough to avoid Monica falling onto them with her claws raised, intent on finishing the job.

The angel had caught up, raising her shield and ready to attack.

Monica's ear twitched, her attack changed. Instead, she grasped at one of her victims and raised her as an improvised shield to meet the angel's charge.

The stratagem worked, with a look of horror in her eyes, the angel was forced to cancel her attack in the last second, lest she hit her companion and crush her. A chance Monica did not let slip. Jumping at the angel, she swung her screaming victim downwards and hammered the angel down against the ground. The feline moved in to secure her kill, her claws barely stopped in time when the angel spun and put her shield in the way.

"I need to stop them," Rick whispered, breaking from the spell of witnessing the unfolding events. This fight could not be allowed to go on.

They were going to die.

His eyes kept glued to the fierce battle that kept unfolding, Monica outmaneuvered them, using them against one another. She was ruthless, and would not let them organize; the instant they tried, she'd target the one leading the attempt. And each time she found her mark, she would aim for the kill, and miss by so very little.

The others were well coordinated, and knew how to cover for each other's backs. But if someone slipped...

How could this come to a stop without either side getting killed? He'd lost three already, he couldn't have more, not now, no! His feet began to move before he was able to fully process what to do, running towards the battlefield. A part of him cursed, this was stupid, so incredibly stupid.

Was there an alternative though?

The human was blocked almost immediately by one of the women that'd been closer. She had dark brown hair, a thick scaled tail, and a look that was too bewildered. "Sir, get out of here!"

"I need to stop her!"

"She's a feral, you can't!"

"Yes, I can!" He replied, looking over the woman's shoulder towards the fight. "Monica!"

The feline was attacking the angel, trying to get through the shield and land a strike somewhere critical. The angel was being pushed back.

And the instant Rick had called her name, Monica spun around. Her eyes locked onto the woman was blocking Rick's path. Her eyes narrowed into slits. "RICK!" The call was followed by the angel rocketing across the field and into a tree, kicked out of the way before she could take the chance to strike.

Several things happened at the same time.

Monica's legs glowed with a dull gray light and the sound of a BANG as she was no longer there on the spot she'd been standing on. Her trajectory was a singular straight line, a blur of white that streaked through the downpour, too fast to be stopped. Rick sensed rather than see the anger; the feline had been practically frothing at the mouth with single-minded purpose to kill the one that stood in front of him.

The feeling was oppressive, he wasn't even her target, and he felt as if he'd gotten the air knocked out of him. The woman that was currently between him and Monica had frozen stiff, eyes wide, face pale, slack jaw. She was trembling.

Rick barely had the time to shove the scaled woman out of the way before Monica's trajectory brought her into a direct interception with him. His eyes met Monica's as she suddenly realized the only thing in her way was Rick himself. The anger broke, confusion led to panic.

He was a stationary object, and she was the truck barreling down the highway.

Physics took the wheel.

The acceleration from the impact knocked the air out of Rick's lungs, he heard more than felt his ribcage snap, ribs shattering. Monica tried her best to slow down, her arms wrapping around him, large meaty paws, holding his head and hips, twisting herself to put her body between him and what was about to happen.

The deceleration against the tree brought his consciousness to a halt, he didn't get the time to feel pain.

Chapter 055 [Alice]

Alice sat down near one of the peepholes that let her more easily see the spider monster outside. Even with the rain, it was easy to see the creature had not moved from its spot since its last attack, remaining perched on the branch and carefully observing them from within the forest. The spider creature lay on the massive branch that stuck out from the tree, maybe thirty meters or so off the ground, her body that of a car-sized black spider with a woman's torso attached to its front. There was something about the spider-half that had Alice's mind tying itself into knots.

She was a teacher; she'd gone through school once upon a time, and she distinctly remembered her physics class. The reason why bugs weren't massive was because they literally couldn't be. Exoskeletons would collapse far before they'd reach the size of a car. Something about the cube law.

But the arachnid monster wasn't JUST massive. It had moved at incredible speed across the forest.

A forest with trees at least twice as tall and ten times as wide as any Earth had ever seen.

It was probably a waste of time to think about it right now, to mull over the thought, but the more she thought, the less sense it made. She hated the hard sciences with a passion, too many numbers, but there was an inescapable truth that physics were equally unforgiving.

What weren't they seeing here? What allowed such a creature to exist? Water was still wet, and nothing really felt excessively heavy or light, so gravity should be the same. Was it the material the spider's exoskeleton was made of? Or something else? Perhaps the animals here had evolved to use some unknown substances... Maybe it was like the berries they'd found? The little blue marble of a fruit she held within her fingers tingled, an electric color that almost appeared to glow in the dark.

It wasn't worth a headache, Alice concluded. She was trying to distract herself too hard, and whatever that spider-half was made out of, it was sturdy enough to handle all that weight and movement. That means they had little hope of piercing it.

All the musings in the world over some bug's body weren't going to distract her. Not from the real reason she kept looking in the monster's direction every other hour. The one thing that gripped her with an insidious fear. One that reminded her of the fate that awaited them if they weren't able to escape or get rid of the thing.

The cocoon that hung from the branch had once resembled a human in its shape. That had been yesterday. Today it was shriveled, dried up, and deformed. Whatever had happened to the body inside, it was hard to believe there was much left of it. The part of Alice that warned her of how futile it was to watch was right next to that little voice that whispered and poked at that self-destructive curiosity within her.

To attempt to answer how long they had before the monster came for another one of them.

That was the underlying question. How long did they have? Would help come in time? At all?

Alice glanced at the other survivors. There was little sound to be made. She imagined there wasn't much to be talked about, anyway. The foreboding sensation that loomed over them was oppressive in its own way. At least the sound of the rain made for a decent distraction if one opted to close their eyes and just listen. A drumming sound with no rhythm that drowned out all else.

But there was little room for the lie. The survivors looked to one another as if ready to step in line and towards the monster.

"I can't stand this." The teacher's voice broke out to pierce the dark shadows that were cast within the bus' remains.

Situated around her, there was May and one of the injured. She needed only to walk towards the center of the totaled vehicle to take one long withering glare at everyone present.

"We can't give up now," Alice said into the small crowd that remained on the floor, seated and looking downcast. "We have to find a way out of this."

"Alice..." Victor muttered.

Evidently, the fellow teacher did not look like he wanted to stir things up. And Alice vehemently disagreed. "No, we can't just sit here and wait. How much longer do any of you think that thing will take before it comes for more?"

It was Ms. Dodson who spoke up. "Then give the monster one of the ill," the woman spoke from the farthest corner of the bus. Among everyone present, she was the one who had the most distance between herself and the main entrance, the purpose of her location rather clear. "It will buy us time so we can starve to death instead."

"We will not sacrifice anyone."

The woman sneered. "And what makes you think you have the right to decide for everyone here?" There was no missing the fire in those eyes as she stood up, walking toward Alice. "It's not your place, you're not the one in charge here."

Alice leaned back, crossing her arms. "I am not deciding for everyone."

"Liar." The yellowed teeth flashed, an accusatory finger raising itself to point at her as if it had come out of a grave. "From the start, you've been pushing to have your way. When you were told we had to move out of here, you insisted we had to stay! So we did!" A sweeping hand gestured around. "Now look at us! We are going to die, eaten by a monster. All because you couldn't stomach making the right call."

The words struck deep.

Alice recoiled, reacting too late to hide the flinch. It was a mistake, of course, because it gave Ms. Dodson all the room she needed to step forward. The bony finger pushed and poked Alice's shoulder with a painful jab that caught the teacher completely by surprise.

"We will die because of you," she said, swiping her hand in front of the teacher's face. The slap missed, but Alice had to take a step back. Ms. Dodson moved forward like a locomotive gaining momentum. "You let that blithering boy I have to call my nephew drag Barry away. Now, where are they? All because of you."

"We don't know-."

Another step forward. "Do you have any proof?"

"No, but I'm sure-."

"The only thing someone like you should be certain of is that your decisions put us in danger!" Ms. Dodson's face was bright red. "You betrayed the trust we had in you. We listened to your words and look where that got us!"

Her words were like a spark. All around them the eyes of the survivors were focusing on the duo. Anger is an easy emotion to summon when everything else was lost. And Ms. Dodson was giving them a culprit to point their fingers at.

"I didn't, no, I-." Alice felt herself losing terrain and her words. Was it true? Had she pushed them all into this disaster? As she looked around for answers, she was only able to find scowls and silent glares. Daggers in the dark that pointed their sharp edges in her direction.

The older woman didn't relent, the finger pushing against Alice's shoulder with a sting. "It's not your decision to make who dies and who lives. It's ours." She whirled around, facing the people there, she raised her hand. "All in favor of sending the unconscious ones first!?"

"You can't!"

Alice's cry fell on deaf ears. Her eyes could only widen in horror at what unfolded in front of her.

One by one, the hands rose into the air.

Alice's heart sank deeper and deeper. "You're making a mistake!" She called out to them. "You're sending people to their death!"

Ms. Dodson spun around, and her hand this time met Alice's cheek in full. "You sent us to ours, should have thought about that sooner."

The attack had barely been more than a slap, and there was not much force in it. But the sting pushed through the teacher, a poisonous jab that chilled her gut and made her mind whirl straight down into a pit. She moved forward, a burst of anger making its way through. "If you're going to send someone to their death, then at least look them in the eye when you do so." She pushed back, moving a step forward, eyes turning away from the old woman and to those present.

"Vote for me to die, then." She glared at each of them. "Look me in the eye and tell me to die for your sake!"

Each face she stared at hesitated, as gazes abruptly lowered, and their raised hands faltered.

"If you want to volunteer to the front of the line, then go ahead." Ms. Dodson waved towards the spot behind Alice, the bus entrance. When had she cornered the teacher so far back? "You got us into this mess, atoning is the least you can do."

Alice hesitated, trying to meet the eyes of the others and finding them all avoiding her entirely. Like they wanted to pretend she wasn't even there. Or rather, that staring at her was too much of a burden.

It was the final nail.

Alice's hands tightened into fists, as anger and frustration and despair balled into a single mass of burning hot pain inside her chest. Her stomach twisted

in revolt. A withering breath and a single word left her, trembling in rage. "Fine."

And just like that, her fate was sealed.

Without rebuke or argument, without another word, Alice turned around to the front of the bus. The others moved out of her way without so much as a word. The young psychology teacher reached the entrance and with little fanfare began pulling the chairs that blocked the door. It was easier than she thought it should have been. Their meager defenses collapsed almost on their own. A testament to how truly vulnerable they were. Alice took a single deep breath and moved to stand under the door's frame and paused as she looked outside, cool air buffeting her face, humidity, and the sound of thunder.

The rain hadn't really stopped, only slowed down. And in that time, as she stood next to the open bus door, Alice's mind contemplated nothing at all.

She wanted to; she wanted to think about many things. Her boyfriend, her family, her teaching career, her students. Maybe even think about something inane that could help her keep herself in place, like how her socks were wet and her back ached, how messy her hair was, how she'd kill for a cup of coffee right about now.

There was a sense of fruitlessness to the consideration. What would it help? She was going to die, and anything she thought was going to be lost, meaningless.

So instead she just thought... nothing.

Blessed silence.

The water splashed against the dirt, leaving puddles all over the place, and the sky was dark and getting darker still. How many hours did she have left before the monster would move? The creature just... lied there, nodding off while seated on the branch. And despite its prone position, Alice could tell it was anything but vulnerable. Its blackened arachnid half had legs that ended tipped in points that made her into a creature with eight spears for legs. Its mass alone would crush anyone, and the speed with which it had shown it

can move was nothing short of impossible. The chitin likely impenetrable by any improvised weapon they might wield.

The noise of thought came back to her, unable to be contained for long.

A monster- an Arachnae as one of the students had called it. Tomas? Right, Tomas, the young man that had left with Rick and the cat and two others.

Was Rick ok? Had he really died to the forest? Had he managed to call for help? Alice shook her head; there was little sense in dwelling on that. At this point it was clear the chances weren't in her favor. And it wouldn't change what would happen to her. But at least, she hoped, her act would change what happened to those that remained.

She reached into her pocket; there was something soft and rubbery inside. Alice glanced at them, the berries that she'd been holding onto and forgotten all about. They were electric blue and looked very much like something she shouldn't eat. The skin tingled against her palm and it made her wonder whether eating them would save her from pain or make it worse.

If the spider monster opted to kill her quickly, then it wouldn't make a difference. But if she didn't...

Alice's eyes moved back to the spider as it napped.

The hollowed out cocoon hung from the branch. It had once held someone in it, but now it was impossible for there to be much anything left inside. It appeared like the worst way to go out, trapped and...

"You don't have to do this."

It was Victor, his hand pressing against her back. She turned to stare at him over her shoulder. "If someone's going to die to protect the others, at least it should be by their own choice." With a scoff, Alice shrugged his hand off of her. "Not because they happen to be convenient."

She noted grimly that the man did not answer her words, looking anywhere but at her. There was shame in those eyes, hesitation, and fear. "It's wrong."

Alice couldn't stand it anymore. She knew her own determination would falter the moment she thought too much over it. With a grunt she stepped outside before she could think twice about it.

The first thing to happen was that she got wet. The rain and the puddles left her soaked within seconds. It weighed down on her, cold, seeping through her clothes and into her bones, a chill that made her shudder.

"Alice!"

Victor called out to her, but she ignored it, taking three more steps away from the bus.

No one dared to follow, and that was just fine for her.

With the water all around her, and the sound of the storm dwelling up above, Alice turned to look at the sky. Lightning flashed in the sky, and for a perfect moment in time the world was nothing but rain. Goosebumps traversed through her skin; it was starting to get a little cold, but she didn't mind. This moment was all she had. She'd enjoy it however long it lasted.

A shadow moved across the clouds.

"Alice!"

The teacher lowered her gaze from the heavens and to the monster that awaited below.

The spider had awakened.

The wait was over.

Chapter 056 [Alice]

Alice stood in the rain, drenched from head to toe, her shoes half sunken into mud. The woman looked upon the spider and for a moment she was confused, as she felt... nothing.

She was detached, like she wasn't herself. Her mind was seated some place else, watching the woman named Alice stand in the rain and look at death as it leisurely yawned. Alice's heart wasn't hammering like a drum- no, that was someone else. Not her. Silently she watched.

The monster had too many teeth, too sharp, and the creature's smile was truly a dentist's nightmare. Its hair was a bony white, its body a game of contrast between deathly pale and black. It had not deemed to jump off its branch or rush, merely to focus on the human that had stepped outside of the metal box and peer at it in apparent consideration. If there were thoughts to be had in the spider's mind, Alice guessed they were along the lines of how much of a threat the lone creature posed to it. Maybe it was comparing Alice to the other human-like monsters in the forest?

The line of thought was clear to her, the monster hadn't bothered to attack the group earlier than they'd ran because it knew that cornered prey were at their most dangerous.

A forest that was this ruthless would not forgive severe injuries, tempting luck was a one-way ticket to becoming a meal.

Slowly the monster descended from its branch and to the forest floor, spiraling her way around the trunk. Its eyes remained on Alice every step of the way, the trajectory down clearly more defensive than aggressive, the monster wanted to give herself room to escape if anything happened. That alone told Alice she was not being looked at as an easy meal but a likely threat.

Four red eyes peered at Alice, gauging her as the rain poured around them.

The psychology teacher looked back at the monster through the eyes of the woman that stood in the rain. She was calm, peering through locks of wet hair that fell from her face. There was something magnificent about how the spider moved. Graceful, each leg appeared to have a mind of its own, extending and contracting and pulling the massive body forward in a glide through the forest floor. Almost mechanical.

Idly, Alice realized the arachnid wasn't jumping her; it was watching her, warily. She thought back to the werewolves, and how cautious they'd been, unwilling to approach the row of torches and eager to run when they'd made the noise.

The momentary pause for thought had distracted her; the spider had circled slightly to the side, and Alice realized this just as the creature abruptly turned and accelerated in her direction.

Everything in the human's body told her to move, to run, to hide and avoid the danger.

Instead, she did the opposite. With a scream, Alice charged forward.

The spider froze on the spot, backpedaling quickly, gaining distance despite Alice's straightforward charge. It had moved so fast it'd been out of the clearing before she'd even taken five steps. With a huff, Alice's body thrummed with adrenaline, but her thoughts remained away from it all, boiling with a different set of thoughts.

Alice hated it; she hated it all. The death, the pain, the silence drowned by the rain. The ugliness inside people when everything was pushed to the edge. It was an emotion that frothed at the mouth, snarling and biting at everything and everyone.

"COME AT ME!" Alice roared at the monster, taking deep breaths, clenching her fists.

The monster didn't charge her, slowly pacing to one side, then the other. There was cunning in those eyes that gleamed in the darkness. It never stayed still, its every step appearing wary and cautious, its focus on observing every

twitch of Alice's arms. Then, it made its decision. It charged again; Alice's determination flared, and she charged at it again.

This time it didn't backpedal, jumping to the side and abruptly turning towards the bus, heading straight towards the open entrance, and the people peeking out into the ongoing fight.

"NO!" Alice moved to pursue, not fast enough to catch up, but intent on scaring the monster away once more.

One step.

Two steps.

Three.

The woman felt her foot sink into something not quite like mud. It was gooey, elastic, it stuck to her sneaker and refused to let go. Balance suddenly became a fight as her foot had been rooted in place, one she lost. Her hands flailed as she fell face first into the mud.

A quick look over her shoulder revealed the problem. The reason for her fall had been simple; she'd stepped on a glob of something white, something... like silk.

"Alice!"

The shout pulled her attention towards the current immediate threat; she turned just in time to see the spider had spun on a dime and was charging straight at her. The attack on the bus had been a feint- Alice had fallen for the trap and it was all going to end now.

She rolled anyway as best as she could, kicking at her shoe to free her foot from the silk.

A shadow streaked across the sky.

The spider's armored legs fell where she'd been only a second earlier. But hope of escape was dashed, a second attack had followed, faster than she

could avoid. With a stomp, the spider stepped on her left calf, bone cracked, pain exploded through her like a tidal-wave.

Alice refused to scream.

Her lips sealed shut as the creature reached down to her with a hand that was far too thin to wield the power it did. She pulled Alice from the mud and yanked her upwards. Alice quickly looked for a way out, something used to pry herself free of the iron grip. But the monster didn't hesitate or wait, its hauntingly beautifully pale female face opened her mouth wide, showing too many teeth- all sharp. Something within the creature's mouth glowed a sickly purple, a dark green ooze dripping from her fangs.

Like a cobra, she lunged down to bite.

Alice's right hand had gripped something in her pocket, without a second of hesitation she shot the hand forward, shoving the electric blue berries against the monster's eyes.

The impact of its face against her palm was like a clap. The berries exploded from the pressure, blue goop spreading over both her palm and the monster's nose and eyes. Instantly, the blue fluid burst into fire. Pain exploded on Alice's hand, the sensation not one she could focus on because the monster had immediately flung her away.

Like a rag doll, Alice flew, tumbling through the mud.

Alice's right hand was wreathed in flames. This time she couldn't hold back, she screamed, plunging her fist into the mud and watching it bubble as the agony turned her world searing white. She refused to lose focus, jaw clenched tightly, struggling against the pain, she had not looked away from the monster. Fire licked its face, the Arachnae tumbled backwards, using her human hands to bat away at the flames, unable to stop them.

The fire on the monster's face lasted a full twenty seconds, Alice gathered the strength to stand up on her one good leg, glaring. The teacher's hand was heavily burnt, her hand numb, and the damage reaching all the way to her forearm. The mud was soothing but barely.

But the spider had been far better off, the moment the fire had died out the only thing left behind was only one of its four eyes remaining shut, and singe marks on its forehead and hair.

"I guess that answers that," Alice muttered under her breath. The monsters were made of something different from humans it seemed. The teacher let out a mirthless chuckle, wincing and watching the boiling anger in the creature as it gave up on all efforts to use tactics and charged her. Their eyes met, emotions mirrored. "I hope I give you indigestion."

But the spider did not make it.

"To the ground!"

A voice boomed out, Alice didn't hesitate, jumping to the side.

A bolt of lightning came down from the sky and struck the spider. A thunderclap that made the rain disappear for a split second, the sound concussive against the teacher's flesh. A flash of light that left spots dancing in Alice's eyes. "What!?"

A shadow descended upon the teacher.

And suddenly she wasn't on the ground anymore. Alice screamed. Air whipped around her head, the rain smashing against her face as her vision suddenly blurred. The world spun and up became down for a fraction of a second. Two hard points of force held her by her shoulders.

When she regained the ability to see, she realized she was definitely up in the air.

"I've got you, ma'am!"

Alice looked up and found herself entirely without words.

A girl- no, another of the monsters. Its feet were large scaly claws, its arms were wings, and she wore a set of black sweats. A beautiful angular face with braided hair a woman that wore a green shorts, a black chocker, big goggles, a cocky smile, and much to Alice's shock, nothing else.

"The wings are here!"

Her concerns about her current new predicament were pushed aside, reality came crashing back with the splash of rain against her face. Alice turned downwards to focus on the spider. The teacher was so far up, everything had changed. They were flying near the treetops, hundreds of meters above the floor. The bus barely the size of her thumb.

A bolt of lightning flew overhead, streaking down towards the ground. The muddy puddles sizzled and exploded in steam, the impact leaving a char mark behind.

"Good thing you used that fire-marble, we almost missed you lot."

Alice couldn't care to pay attention to the words, fixated on the visage of the monster. Monsters. Two more winged creatures and the spider. A spider that was trying to run towards the trees. To little effect, one of the flying monsters, one with red hair and equally red wings, plunged towards the ground. A wall of flames emerged from each wing, blocking the path.

When the spider attempted to turn, the other winged woman moved her hand from pointing to the sky, and down upon the spider. As if bringing down the hammer of a god.

BOOM

Another bolt of lightning descended from the heavens, a column of twisting wicked white lines that hit the spider. Alice had to blink away the spots, seeing how the spider had had the audacity not to die, stumbling and trying to seek another way out. The next lightning bolt knocked her down.

Then came another.

And another.

And another.

Each hit did not make the spider vaporize, but it did leave the creature less able to move. And the attacks did not stop.

"Ana is pissed," the monster carrying Alice laughed over the deafening sound of thunder that made their flight wobble and tumble.

Despite the deep sense of awe and... fear, something else emerged deep within Alice's chest. This could only mean one thing, only one. Tears welled within her, blurring the sight of the fire-red monster summoning flames to ensure the spider would not live to see another day. "They did it." Alice muttered, her chest tightening into a ball. "They did it."

"Yup, all hell's broken loose." The winged woman laughed, slowly descending as the fight had come to an end.

"Got every Hunter mobilized to rescue you fellas. We came just in time, eh?"

Chapter 056.1 [Bonus][Tomas] (Volume 1 End)

Tomas Smith sat on the hospital bed and tried to get his thoughts straight. It was hard to focus with the tubes connected to his wrist that were pumping sedatives into his blood-stream. It was as if his mind had been trapped in molasses for the longest time and it was finally clearing up, ever so slightly.

The first thing he properly paid attention to was that Kat was there. She was the only other occupant in the room. There was a bed she should be resting in, but she'd taken the chair and was seated next to the young man instead.

Her blond head rested on his lap, looking up at him with wandering eyes and a thoughtful expression.

"Hey," Tomas muttered weakly, giving a slight smile, finally having found the focus to push words out of his lips.

"Hey you, mister," she replied, a slight smile emerging on her lips. "Finally waking up."

"What did I miss?" He mumbled, pausing for a second as he took in the room around them. "We... made it?" The walls were a light green, and the window was framed in stone, wood was the main building material he could see besides the cement.

"You've been out only about a day." Kat nodded. "Nurses said to take things easy, the medicine will make it hard to, you know, think and shit."

"I think I do." Giving a slight nod, he leaned back down, closing his eyes. "What happened?"

Kat's smile broadened further. "Depending on who you ask, we either washed up on the shore... or a certain someone dragged my cute butt out of the water after nearly drowning like a rat."

"Rats are great swimmers, I read that-"

"Don't ruin the moment, dumb dumb." The poke she gave Tomas' chest made him wince. "We caused quite a stir, apparently they sent everyone out as soon as they'd confirmed the details." There was a slight trill in her voice, her smile growing further still. "We made it, we should celebrate."

Tomas was only able to nod, not quite sure what or how they should celebrate. Everything was so tiring and so far away. Still, a great wave of relief washed through him. "The others?"

"Last update I got was that they'd found the bus, not much else." Kat was awfully close- her eyes sparkled, and her lips parted ever so slightly. The kiss was soft, lasting only a handful of seconds before she pulled back, cheeks having gained a light shade of red. "That's... for saving me."

Tomas' lips turned upwards into a slight smile. "Thanks."

"No, you dumb ass." She let out a giggle, lightly punching his shoulder, but the light tap brought a heavy groan out of the young man. Kat immediately recoiled. "Oh, woops, sorry about that. Let me get a nurse."

"A... nurse?"

"Oh, right, they told me to get one as soon as you woke up so they could give you another round."

"Another round?"

His question remained unanswered; Kat had left the room before he could even process her words. The door had closed with a soft click, and Tomas was now alone with his own half-drugged thoughts.

As he laid on the bed, he tried to sit up but couldn't quite manage, so he remained there instead, staring and taking in his surroundings.

The bed reminded him of the ones he'd seen in movies about the old war. There was flat, white arched wood at the head and the bottom. And right next to said bed was the pipe holding on to a pair of upside down bottles that

were connected to his wrist through some tubes. One of them was glowing softly, as if someone had dissolved a light-bulb into the liquid itself.

Odd.

Tomas glanced at the rest of the room. There was one other bed much like his own, but lacking any of the medical equipment. Near the corner was a large wooden table, on top of which he could recognize his backpack. The room itself felt... rustic. It lacked the caustic sterile whites of a hospital he was used to, the biggest factor being the window. Wooden frame embedded into stone.

It was like he'd been transported to some tiny European town during the medieval ages. But that didn't quite fit. Not when there was a set of cords leading to a device with a screen that was keeping track of his heartbeat and blood oxygen.

And yet his eyes kept drifting towards the dimly glowing bottle that was dripping a transparent fluid into his veins. His thoughts were interrupted when the door opened, Kat stepping through, closely followed by a nurse.

A demure looking nurse wearing a pink uniform and a light green choker followed the human.

A nurse with a pink uniform that showed more thighs than Tomas thought would have been legal. His eyes bulged slightly, trying to move his attention elsewhere, finding a white name tag atop her left breast. 'Dia' it read.

It almost took him a full second to realize the nurse's head sported hair that was almost as equally pink to the uniform. More strange was that the woman looking at him had vibrant purple eyes. Yet for all his shock, her smile was calm and reassuring as she approached. "Mister Tomas, I will be doing a minor checkup on you. If you'll excuse me..."

Dia reached out with those small hands of hers and gently squeezed his wrist. The touch was soft and warm- warmer still when her palms began to glow a dull white. The warmth very suddenly spread across Tomas' body and he could do little else than relax, melting into the bed, his whole body going

limp. The world had suddenly lost the ability to be anything but pleasurable fluff and pillowy clouds.

And just as quickly as it came, it left.

Tomas shuddered slightly, looking up at the pink-haired nurse. His mouth was hanging open. His whole body felt better, and not just in the subjective sense. The dull aches and pains were entirely gone, at least for the most part. It was as if he'd suddenly jumped ahead a whole week or five. "What did...?"

"One or two more sessions and you'll be good as new, Mister Tomas." The nurse smiled, though the gesture faltered when she focused on his glasses. "If you'd like, I could also take care of that."

"That?"

"Your glasses, sir." Without missing a beat, she reached out to his face, caressing the side of his head. "I was told by Miss Catherine about your eyesight deficit, I would've tried fixing it earlier, but it's always best to do some confirmation while the patient is awake."

"I don't..." Tomas' eyes widened. "My glasses?" He turned to stare at Kat; the young woman was giddy, grinning from ear to ear.

"Go on, ask the sexy nurse to fix you up, you look cooler like this, you know?"

Said nurse blushed ever so slightly. "If you'll excuse me, this might feel slightly uncomfortable." With her other hand, she covered his eyes, and the same odd warmth from earlier washed over him, but only briefly this time. When she pulled back, the young man was left blinking away tears and needing to squint for a moment or two.

Everything looked so... sharp. As if he'd just cleaned his glasses and put them back on, except the high-definition was not limited to a rectangle.

"Oh wow."

"I am glad you approve, sir." The nurse bowed her head.

"That was so cool, how does it feel?" Kat chuckled, leaning forward and gripping Tomas' hand.

His eyes moved up her arms and to her beaming smile, her brilliant blue eyes, her wild unkept dark blond hair. "You... look prettier."

That caught the young woman by surprise; she turned away slightly, cheeks reddening. The nurse apparently found this quite amusing as she giggled. "If you'll excuse me, sir, ma'am." She bowed slightly, turning to leave.

Tomas waited until the pink-haired woman was gone. "Kat, just where are we exactly?"

That brought back the young woman's enthusiasm, her smile sparkled all the wider. "You're not going to believe it. This place is so cool, well, cool for being a small little village near the frontier of a kingdom. It's just..."

Her words were knocked out of her lips when an alarm blared outside. It was a quick incessant beep that made their hairs stand on end. Kat was on her feet in seconds, opening the door to the room just in time to have Dia push her a step back. "Please stay inside, ma'am." The nurse said in a rush, turning away, following right behind a bed that rushed past the entrance, no less than three other nurses rushing past.

Dia closed the door, the sound of her steps echoing as she moved to follow the bed.

Tomas looked at Kat, the young woman's face was pale.

"Kat?"

"That was Rick."



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